
PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS ENTREPRENEURSHIP, PART 3

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We offer this as the third installment in our opinion series, “Perspectives,” in which we invite *Artivate’s* editorial board members and contributors to respond to open-ended prompts about: their position in relation to arts entrepreneurship; how arts entrepreneurship is situated in relation to other disciplines or fields; what problems we are grappling with as scholars, practitioners, teachers, and artists; and what are the research questions we are attempting to answer individually or as a field. This issue’s is a particularly diverse selection, drawn from various disciplines and across the transdisciplinary spectrum of scholarship and practice. We welcome our newest editorial board member, Neville Vakharia, with his essay on knowledge centrality and showcase the perspectives of two of our founding editorial board members, Gordon Shockley, professor of community resources and development at Arizona State University, and Laura Zabel, executive director of Springboard for the Arts, who concludes with provocative questions for those who undertake research as the core of their enterprise.

Knowledge Centrality and the Artist Entrepreneur

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As the United States continues its evolution to a post-industrial knowledge society, economic growth will continue to be driven by organizations and people that are able to create and use knowledge to advance their goals. Knowledge is now both an economic variable and an economic activity (Machlup, 1962). Knowledge workers, who work with their heads – not their hands – to produce ideas and information, are driving innovation and growth (Drucker, 1967). Since so many artists work with their hands to realize their artistic vision, how could they play a stronger role in our knowledge society?

I believe we need to start with the framework of knowledge centrality, which is built on the foundation of the critical role that knowledge plays within organizational structures and within a knowledge society. A knowledge-centric organization uses collective knowledge to advance organizational goals (Crawford, Hasan, Linger, & Warne, 2009), gaining a competitive edge through an increased ability to innovate, operate more effectively, and respond rapidly to changes in the environment (Grant, 1996).

In my own research on knowledge centrality in arts and cultural organizations, I found that organizations that exhibit knowledge-centric practices with regard to their leadership, technology, and staff development were positively associated with improved financial and operational performance (Vakharia & Janardhan, 2015). In developing a working definition of a knowledge-centric arts organization, I also found that many organizations were struggling with the practice of knowledge creation as a means to advance their goals, jeopardizing their sustainability and relevance. Individual artists, too, face challenges of sustainability and relevance in their own careers, though there is limited research on the role of knowledge creation and artists.

Could knowledge centrality be applied to the individual artist as entrepreneur? Going further, would knowledge-centric artists be better equipped to build a sustainable career by leveraging more opportunities for their work? Because artists are individuals that must adopt

“entrepreneurial habits of mind in their practice” (Essig, 2014, p. 6), I would posit that knowledge centrality could play a key role for artists seeking to advance their careers. However, without empirical research leading to a definition of a knowledge-centric artist, we cannot understand how artists might benefit from knowledge centrality or what impact it could have on their work. Such research into adapting the concepts of knowledge centrality from organizations to individuals could be a valuable effort that would provide artists with useful insights into practices that might enhance their entrepreneurial success. This would require the development of new measures of success as well as an assessment of individual practices that create knowledge.

The benefits of creating a framework of knowledge centrality for artists could be significant for multiple stakeholders. Artists would better understand how certain practices and approaches could improve the reach, scope, and impact of their work. Academic researchers would be able to take a proactive leadership role in developing and implementing a research agenda with immediate applicability to artists, rapidly putting theory into practice. Institutions that serve and support artists could strengthen their efforts by focusing on those efforts that would enhance knowledge centrality and entrepreneurial success.

In a knowledge-driven society and economy, artists must create with both their hands and their heads. Adapting the concepts of knowledge centrality could ensure that the role of the artist in our society continues to grow in relevance and impact.

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The NEA in the 1990s: Advent of the Age of Arts Entrepreneurship

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We now live in the Age of Arts Entrepreneurship. Thanks to the efforts of projects like *Artivate*, it is axiomatic that the arts must be entrepreneurial to survive. I believe that the advent of the Age of Arts Entrepreneurship can be traced to the travails of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA or Endowment) in the 1990s. To survive the 1990s, the NEA engaged in entrepreneurship – *policy* entrepreneurship – in order to survive repeated, credible threats to the agency’s existence.

You might recall that the convergence of controversial art exhibits of, for example, those of Robert Mapplethorpe, Andres Serrano, and the NEA Four in the late 1980s and early 1990s

and the conservative politics of Sen. Jesse Helms, Rep. Newt Gingrich, and the Republican Revolution of the 104th Congress threatened the existence of a budgetarily tiny and hitherto obscure federal agency created under the Johnson Administration in the 1960s to support the arts in the United States. “It was clear,” says Jane Alexander, NEA Chair in the early 1990s, “that we needed to make some changes at the Endowment if we were going to survive elimination” (Alexander, 2000, p. 243). And change they did: by engaging in policy entrepreneurship and recreating the agency. Alert to the source of their travails (i.e., grants to controversial artists), the NEA most significantly collapsed their decades-old grant-giving categories away from artistic disciplines like the Visual Arts and Photography to a few broader, thematic categories like Heritage & Preservation. As the art critic Michael Brenson puts it, “The government decided that in order to save the Endowment, it had to stop investing in artists and invest its cultural authority in institutions” (Brenson, 2001, p. 89). The policy entrepreneurship of the NEA enabled the agency to survive the 1990s.

The policy entrepreneurship of the NEA in the 1990s also serves as a cautionary tale for the Age of Arts Entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship at its root is an economic behavior. As such, while keen to questions of efficiency, value, and thus survival, entrepreneurship by itself is mute on questions of fairness, justice, and right-or-wrong. Yes, the NEA’s entrepreneurship to change enabled it to survive, but at the precipitous cost of no longer directly supporting artists in the United States. As Brenson once more observes, “In Congress, in the Endowment, and in society, there was a place for the art artists made and for the people who commissioned and administered it but there was no place for them” (Brenson, 2001, p. 92). Artists lost an important voice in the federal government and American culture. Was it right for the federal agency supporting artists in the United States to abandon them to survive? Entrepreneurship alone cannot answer that question.

This is not a plea for art-for-art’s-sake; that has never existed in any meaningful or sustainable way. Nor is it cry to eradicate money from the arts; that has never been the case, nor probably should it be. Indeed, my favorite artist, the Northern Renaissance genius Albrecht Dürer might have been one of the most economically efficient, financially successful, and thoroughly entrepreneurial artist of all (see "Portrait of the artist as an entrepreneur," 2011.) Rather, it is a sincere wish to preserve the spirit of artistic creation and to respect the devotion of the artist to her craft along with utilizing the necessity of entrepreneurship in the Age of Arts Entrepreneurship.

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Meaning-making and Arts Entrepreneurship

Laura Zabel

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My relationship to arts entrepreneurship is complicated. Depending on the context, “arts entrepreneurship” is an idea that represents commodification and an attempt to define our most human expression in reductive, monetary terms. In another context it feels aspirational and full

of possibility for us to remake an economy focused on meaning-making and exchange. Most of the time it feels like the best, if flawed, way to describe the work we do at Springboard for the Arts and so I try not to get too hung up on the semantics and instead pursue the work that we believe will make our world a more creative, human place.

Most actual definitions of entrepreneur don't start with the business-minded, tech-start-up-in-a-hoodie, capital driven picture that is commonly imagined; most definitions start with opportunity, and risk, and initiative. That more elemental definition suits most artists perfectly. Our work at Springboard is about helping artists define success for themselves and then gather the tools and resources they need to work towards that success—financial success, recognition, a supportive community, respect, cultural preservation, conversation, and social change, these are all equally valid goals for an artist.

What this means practically is that we try to see the full spectrum of artist needs and work to create a system that is open and as accessible as possible. It means we teach business skills and provide healthcare and legal services *and* we build mechanisms that connect artists with the other sectors of their community and demonstrate their value as creative thinkers and doers around community issues. Our mission is to help artists make a living and a life—and to help communities tap into the creative power of artists. This guiding principle of our work is also our biggest challenge when it comes to measurement. We don't measure our work in purely economic terms (does an artist make more money after they take a workshop?) because that narrow definition would exclude many artists' goals. How do we measure reciprocity, trust, relevance, boldness, agency and power?

Over the years we've come up with some measurement tools for these ideas, or at least satisfactory proxies. For example, the degree to which a person is willing to name themselves as an artist sometimes helps us see agency and confidence. Our ability to create bridges and mechanisms that help relationships continue to thrive beyond a project or program can help us measure reciprocity and trust. Or the ways in which artists' efforts can combine to impact social issues, contentious conversations, and change individual and community narratives can serve as a proxy for relevance and value. In the end, though, most of these measures still feel insufficient. They are insufficient in demonstrating the depth and potential of artists' contributions. Despite a lot of fantastic work across the country, artists remain an under-resourced and under-tapped asset in most places.

I believe this is the core question facing the field of arts entrepreneurship: how do we measure the effectiveness of our work in a way that aligns with the scale of impact we know that artists can have and in a way that doesn't minimize the most basic human need for creative expression? How do we measure meaning-making?