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Designing Meaningful Projects That Meet Community Needs

by Johnny Irizarry

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Taller Puertorriqueño is a community-based cultural center, located in a North Philadelphia neighborhood rich in history. Poverty has taken hold of the area as the collapse and flight of industry and work opportunities has occurred. With so many needs in our area, Taller has to make careful program choices. This is not easy when the needs are so great. In our 22-year history, our mission has been for the arts and culture to be at the core of what we do. Our guiding question in assessing community needs is "How can Taller best influence the overall well-being of the community it serves through the arts?" We seek to develop multi-disciplinary arts and cultural programs in which the community can participate in a significant way.

Within this overall mission, we have pursued many types of projects to meet community needs. In recent years, AIDS has deeply touched the life and work of Taller. A number of artists and others who have worked with Taller are either infected or have passed because of AIDS. This has created in the organization a special interest in establishing programs that address HIV/AIDS and the dramatic impact it has in our local community, as well as the national Latino community.

A commitment to social justice and to an interest in serving as a partner in the continued development of the Latino community has led the organization towards becoming more involved in collaborative projects with schools and other non-arts-specific organizations. As demand for our participation and involvement in collaborations has continued to grow, we found it important to identify a "philosophical definition" to guide us in making choices and decisions on our organizational role in partnerships. We pursue collaborations that operate on principles of cultural pluralism and provide additional resources to our community's cultural educational development. We also seek equal planning and creative power in the projects and equitable financial contributions, if possible. We want the projects to build bridges that can be strengthened in the future, fulfill specific needs, and move beyond stereotypes with sincere intentions of assisting the community on a long-term basis. We seek projects that recognize the expertise of community members, including their knowledge of and access to our community's resources, audiences, art, artists, history, and culture, as well as their capacity to identify problems and implement solutions. We want to break social barriers, exchange ideas, and build on community and organizational stabilization and empowerment.

Our experience has been that once initial trust is established between our agency and specific dedicated teachers and the principals, schools are extremely interested in working with community agencies in special projects, especially if the community

agency brings financial resources and creative projects that can enhance the students' learning. We have had less success when schools approached us with major project ideas but without major funding. Smaller projects developed by schools have been more successful, such as murals, cultural workshops, and presentations.

Making the Partnership Work

In designing projects that meet community needs, community agencies and schools should emphasize several important elements to ensure success. These will apply to all projects, with the emphasis changing depending upon the circumstances of your situation.

1. Build "working teams" to implement the project. One of the most challenging and important components of our AIDS education programs was developing a team where all of the members were equally committed to the concept of the project, to its educational and social mission, and to the community. The team members must have the same information and plan of action and know and respect each other's role in the project. This component has presented the most work for us in the planning and beginning stages of the project. Once this groundwork was accomplished, implementing the rest of the project was much easier.

2. Be sure the school principal is committed to, and well informed about, your project. For the Taller staff, the coordinating artists, AIDS educators, community partners, and the school staff to work on our AIDS projects, we had to have the cooperation of the principal.

3. Establish trust among the groups involved. Having a working team and keeping the principal well informed are the first steps toward establishing trust. It is needed between our organization, the principal, the teachers at the school, and the other team members throughout the project implementation and beyond. In such a diverse partnership, conflicts and differences of opinions will surely arise. These need to be addressed immediately. The solution lies in the commitment of all participating partners to confront each other honestly when problem issues do arise, and continue to work together.

4. Constant communication and trust must be maintained with any outside consultants. Our staff and project coordinating artists have to work very closely together. The responsibilities of the artist need to be clear, especially when he or she is the creative guide to the project. This is a role of guidance and artistic support allowing for the ideas and concepts of the students, teachers, and other project participants to determine the creative and collective outcomes. The logistics need to be clear as well. At

times, the artist would establish a working schedule with the teacher and arrive and realize that special situations had arisen that altered the schedule — a shorter period was in effect, citywide testing was taking place, or some other schedule adjustment. The artist was at first frustrated, but learned to call the main office before coming, to be sure that no special situations had arisen.

5. The active involvement and personal commitment of the teachers greatly affect the project. In our projects, the teachers need to negotiate and share control and power with the project artist and AIDS educator in order to guarantee effective involvement and a successful project. We have discovered that teachers who enjoy team teaching and have a personal investment in the lives of the students beyond the classroom make excellent partners for our AIDS educational projects within schools. We have found many teachers willing and receptive to participating in collaborations of this kind, and they find the time and appropriate way to integrate the project into their curriculum and teaching requirements, sometimes even beyond the project concept.

Art teachers at both schools were especially interested in participating in the project but other teachers were also involved. The home education teacher took on a main role, for example, involving her students in sewing the quilt panels [The National Names Project is a quilt-making project] together. Our teacher contact at one school was a Taller board member, and she got other teachers interested in AIDS education, even if their project wasn't related to our arts projects. At the time we began working on this project, the schools did not have a formal way of teaching the students about AIDS, so our projects prompted a number of AIDS education projects.

A science teacher had his students study and artistically interpret the scientific composition and breakdown of the human immune system caused by HIV/AIDS. The students created individual art panels demonstrating this scientific process. A social studies teacher had her students study the local and national demographics of the spread of the AIDS virus. The students studied how maps are created, the racial and economic composition of the neighborhoods, and the health resources available to the neighborhoods. They also created maps showing how the disease has spread locally and nationally.

6. Mutual investment is important, but funding often comes from only one partner. Funds for our school-based projects have usually been raised by Taller Puertorriqueño from sources specifically interested in supporting AIDS educational alternative and experimental programs, especially within under-served communities. These funds pay for artists' fees, supplies, and production costs, such as printing the comic book. Community-based social service agencies have provided the services of bilingual AIDS educators, informational materials, and other technical assistance to the project. These services were essential with the comic book and poster project.

The schools have adjusted their class schedules to include the effective implementation of the project, integrated the project into their regular curriculum, hosted project receptions, provided supplies and sewing equipment and offered other vital support to the project. Artists, community-based printers, and others have brought to the project artistic guidance, knowledge, and technical assistance beyond what they have been paid for.

The cultural educational work that Taller and many community agencies provide is urgently needed and in growing demand. It has become clear to many educators that traditional educational methods have failed to prepare communities of color to progress educationally, economically, and socially. Many of Taller's projects are designed to address and counteract racism, build self esteem and awareness, create respect for differences, identify commonalities, and build and promote community pride and unity. With the comic book project, for example, it was important to create a bilingual publication because of the bilingual population we were targeting. We had a bilingual Latina writer and educator work with the youth in developing the story line. The opportunity to teach reading, writing, and creative skills in developing the story line was a key component of the project. We also had a visual artist work with the youth doing the drawings. She and the students brought lots of comic books to study options, emphasizing anatomy, graphic arts techniques, and how to use many different art materials.

The youth had a direct and determining role in the entire story line development and in the final images used. We were committed and willing to end the story in whatever way the majority of the youth in the schools felt it should end. The AIDS educator worked with both the writing group and the drawing group as well and did an excellent job in keeping the information accurate and clear for what people needed to know.

Lasting Value

The administrative responsibility of managing these special grants and the full burden of fundraising for the projects, on an organization the size of Taller Puertorriqueño, has been difficult for us to sustain. The lack of appropriate funding for programs such as these is a limiting factor. At the same time, the implementation of these projects would not have been possible without the support of so many people willing to make the project a reality. We have discovered that participants have made deeply personal connections to their involvement in the projects and to the opportunity to address a difficult issue such as AIDS, and its effects in their lives and that of the community, through the arts.

The seniors at the Norris Square Senior Citizen Center used the AIDS Quilt Project to search for understanding and provide emotional and community support to a fellow senior who had recently lost a son to AIDS and had stopped attending the Senior Center due to fear of rejection. The quilting workshops, discussion sessions, ecumenical service, video documentation, and exhibition of the final quilts with the project served as a friendly and "easier" method to address their fellow senior's loss and fear of rejection and to facilitate a better understanding of the AIDS epidemic and its direct impact in the community's life. In the video that documents the projects, the seniors and others involved in the project speak to many issues that extend beyond the issue of AIDS, such as intergenerational relationships, politics, race, class, gender, sexuality, and other factors in our ability to confront and find collective solutions to the problems that deeply affect our community.

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