

# **“My idea of ‘the arts’ has changed”: A Case Study of Using Active Research in a Community and Cultural Planning Course**

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## **Abstract**

Universities and the neighborhoods around them often have challenging relationships with one another (Bruning et al 2006; Martin and Allen 2009; Martin et al 2005; Silka 2000; Whalen et al 2012). What happens when students confront these head-on in an experiential learning exercise? This case study examines an attempt to bridge a professor’s research, professional practice, and teaching activity through utilizing “real-time, real world” data from active field research in the neighborhoods immediately adjacent to a large university in a major metro area, with the goal of offering students a way to practice working in challenging circumstances while also providing a safe space for reflection on that engagement. The neighborhoods studied face extreme economic and other challenges, while the university implements an ambitious agenda for growth. By using the research effort to frame an experiential learning project within a cultural planning course in a graduate arts administration program, students were able to confront the challenges of university and community relations and to consider different perspectives regarding the role and value of arts and culture to communities. Course exercises were grounded in a concurrent, faculty-led research project that enabled the students to both shadow the work of the project’s researchers and to gather information on their own. Students’ reflections demonstrate the resulting impact on their capacity to link theory, observation, and practice throughout the course.

## **Keywords**

Community engagement, cultural planning, university and community relations, arts administration, arts administration education

## **Introduction**

Many researchers have explored the tension that exists in university-community relations. Martin et al (2005) point to a chronic inability of the two to collaboratively address shared concerns, yet also offer hope that a more recent focus on innovative efforts, where partnerships are based on shared assets, can better address shared social and other challenges facing the university-community dynamic. Bruning et al recognize that while this tension has its roots in historically negative views of cities as grounds for moral decay from which students must be protected, more recently, “the notion of a seamless community and university has increased in popularity,” (2006). Martin and Allen note that students themselves are often on the front lines of this dynamic, particularly regarding questions of housing and its effect on the porosity of a university’s boundaries (2009). Whalen et al, who studied the effects of the urban landscape on community, concur that students can be a lightning rod to university-community

dynamics (2012). Silka, however, embraces the challenges presented in forming university and community partnerships, noting that they can be fertile ground for, “urban universities [to] examine questions of how knowledge will be produced and used,” and that effective university-community relationships can play a key role in providing opportunities to align faculty members’ service, teaching, and research activity (2000, 29). What happens, then, when these tensions are purposefully explored in the classroom? This case study examines one such attempt, based in a cultural planning course for arts administration students in Philadelphia, PA.

AADM 755 Community and Cultural Planning is an elective course in the graduate arts administration program at Drexel University. In Fall 2013 the course was offered in conjunction with an active arts research project taking place in the neighborhoods immediately adjacent to the University, led by Drexel’s arts administration faculty. As a lead researcher on the project and the instructor of the course, I sought to address a number of opportunities to explore university and community relations, and the role and value of the arts in communities, within the context of the course’s design. Included among these was to find ways to engage students in theory, observation, and practice, and to bridge my own research, professional practice, and teaching activity. At the same time, I needed to maintain necessary boundaries of privacy and integrity between and within the classroom and the research effort, while using each to inform the other. Finally, I aimed to offer students a way to practice working in challenging circumstances while also providing a safe space for reflection on that engagement. This article focuses on the students’ experiences in the course.

The connection of the Community and Cultural Planning course to an active research project was also an effort to incorporate experiential learning and community engagement, ideas considered important within arts administration education. Varela found that experiential learning is a core subject area in a large majority of graduate programs in arts administration (2013, 81). Dewey (2004; 2005) and Sikes (2000) have also written about the need for arts administration education to foster in students an understanding of cultural context, an appreciation for diversity, and the value of broader community-based representation in cultural policy and planning efforts. The Association of Arts Administration Educators (AAAE), in its curricular standards for graduate arts administration programs, echoes these ideas, describing community engagement as, “...a hallmark of successful arts organizations in the twenty-first century,” (2014, 11). The AAAE standards cite participation and leadership in community-focused programs, partnerships, and initiatives among the community engagement skills exemplifying best practices in arts administration education.

Dewey notes that among four paradigms changing the nature of arts administration, and thus arts administration education, a changing cultural policy paradigm is occurring. This change indicates, in part, the need for a wider set of decision-makers in policy and planning processes, representing a broader set of interests that includes, but extends far beyond, arts and culture (2004, 18). She states that, “The interaction of systemic change and local contexts may require certain capacities (functions) matched with skill sets that are specific to national and local environments,” and continues to describe five competencies helpful to arts administrators addressing these paradigm shifts. Included among them is the representation of cultural identity, which incorporates, “...the capacity to maintain local identities, pluralism and diversity in the face of global cultural forces,” (2004, 19). Dewey then argues that arts administration education may benefit from a “metaskills approach” that enables students to contextualize these systemic changes at the local, national, and international levels (2004, 21).

Sikes introduces a series of metaphors to identify skills for arts administration education to foster in students, and in doing so posits that arts administration education must prepare leaders to more fully understand the cultural contexts of the communities in which they operate, stating that, “[t]his issue of narrow-band or broad-based cultural representation may be the biggest issue for arts administrators in the next century if not the next millennium,” (2000, 96-97). He further notes that future arts leaders can effectively advocate for the cause only if they understand what a community values relative to arts and culture. Sikes concludes, in part, that arts administration educators must develop curricula and courses that equip students with a wide range of cultural perspectives, with the desire to support smaller, diverse cultural groups, and with the ability to understand the history, context, and aesthetics of cultures other than their own (Sikes 2000, 100). Dewey adds to Sikes’ metaphors one of the arts administrator as diplomat, suggesting that arts administration education include curricular experiences that prepare students as strategic leaders, able to capably understand and represent different cultural contexts and identities in order to serve as effective change-agents in the policy environment (2005, 16-17).

The research effort that helped frame the Community and Cultural Planning course sought to understand the role of arts and culture in Mantua, Powelton Village, and West Powelton, three West Philadelphia neighborhoods immediately adjacent to Drexel University facing substantial economic and other challenges while the University pursues an ambitious agenda for growth and development. “A Fragile Ecosystem: The Role of Arts and Culture in Philadelphia’s Mantua, Powelton Village and West Powelton Neighborhoods,” the resulting report from the research project, examines not only the crucial role of arts and culture in these communities, but also focuses on the challenges local cultural and other organizations face in funding, capacity building and outreach, as well as the challenges and opportunities present in the current university-community dynamic (Hawkins, Vakharia and Zitcer 2014).

The research project was supported by the Drexel University Office of Research and its Office of Community Relations. A competitive grant award enabled a team of nine, including three faculty members, four graduate students, and two undergraduate students, to assess the cultural opportunities available in the neighborhoods immediately surrounding the University’s West Philadelphia campus. The research conducted included: a comprehensive review of existing community plans and related academic literature; individual interviews with twelve civic and community leaders; six focus groups; and 450 community intercept surveys. Arts administration faculty analyzed and tested the resulting qualitative and quantitative data and delivered a report to the public in August 2014. Two students on the research team also enrolled in the community and cultural planning course, and I served as a lead researcher on the project as well as the course instructor.

Feedback from students in the community and cultural planning course indicates that the process of grounding the work in an existing research project helped them better understand the course theory and content. The two students who served on the research project team in addition to taking the course reflected that their experiences in one strengthened their capacity in the other. Perhaps more importantly, it also deepened the students’ connections to the neighborhoods studied, changing their perspective of these neighborhoods and their understanding of the value of the arts. Rather than approaching community and cultural planning from their own point of view as arts administrators, the use of the research project to ground the course enabled students to better understand other points of view, raising complex issues of professional practice, the role of the arts in communities, and considerations of how students are representing (or not) the university itself to the community. The challenges this presented to students are representative of ones that they will face throughout their

careers.

This case study describes the course’s design and theoretical underpinnings. Students’ experiences are examined through their reflections on the use of the research effort as a framing device for the course. Finally, implications of the work and lingering questions are explored.

### Course Design

To echo the active research effort, data from the research project was utilized as laboratory material for the Community and Cultural Planning course. In what I termed the research lab for the course, students were asked to examine and ultimately apply quantitative and qualitative data from the ongoing research project to the development of recommendations for a proposed cultural plan in Mantua, Powelton Village, and West Powelton. The cultural plan was built collaboratively by the students throughout the term and served as the final assignment for the course. Though the results of this assignment were shared with the other project researchers, it was not considered to be part of the active research effort. Rather, it was a classroom exercise built, in part, upon the data gathered through that research effort, assessed in combination with the students’ understanding of cultural planning theory and additional data gathered by the students through other classroom assignments.

The class began with an exploration of existing literature and theory regarding definitions of cultural planning, types and typical components of cultural plans, community engagement, the value of arts and culture to communities, and ethics in community planning and engagement. Three definitions of cultural planning were presented at the outset of the course in order to frame discussions that led to students developing their own explanation of the term. They are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Definitions of Cultural Planning Explored in AADM 755 Community and Cultural Planning at Drexel University, Fall 2013

<i>Dreezen</i>	a structured, community-wide fact-finding and consensus-building process to assess community needs and develop a plan of action that directs arts and cultural resources to address those needs (1998)
<i>Borrup</i>	efforts to weave multiple endeavors and professions into the never-ending work of building and rebuilding the social, civic, physical, economic, and spiritual fabrics of communities; engages the cultural and creative energies inherent in every person and every place (2011)
<i>Mercer</i>	the strategic and integral planning and use of cultural resources in urban and community development (1991); not the "planning of culture," but ensuring that cultural considerations are present in all processes of planning and development; its underlying philosophy is an "anthropological" approach to cultural resources that links them to broader agendas for economic development, sustainability, and quality of life (2002, 7)

Dreezen’s straightforward approach was developed for use by practitioners of cultural planning in America; namely, local arts agencies in cities and towns across the country. Borrup’s asset-based approach to cultural planning is reminiscent of Martin et al’s (2005) in its focus on assets. Mercer’s description makes clear that cultural planning is about much more than simply planning for culture. Other authors whose work was used to frame course exercises, analysis, and discussion included Arlene Goldbard (2010), Mark Stern and Susan Seifert (2007; 2008; 2010), Lea Ghilardi (2001), Alan Brown and Jennifer Novak-Leonard (2011), and Doug Borwick (2012).

The use of the concurrent research project data in the course was framed as a series of laboratory exercises. Each week, in addition to readings and discussions of theory and practice, students were asked to gather and/or examine quantitative and qualitative data related to the development of the final assignment. Some of these exercises, such as a two-hour walk of the research area, led students to gather their own data, while others, such as examining reports of the area's demographics and history, or listening to recordings from focus groups with area residents, utilized data gathered in the faculty-led research project. In this way, students were able to shadow the work of the project's researchers while also gathering their own data to supplement their analysis.

The primary goal of the course was for students to gain confidence in their abilities to guide or otherwise contribute to a successful community and cultural planning process. Other goals for the course included increasing students' capacity to: demonstrate a broad understanding of the arts, cultural, and creative sector and its role and purpose within society; explore ways in which arts and culture can be appropriately leveraged to build and sustain communities; develop the ability to critically examine a community's arts and cultural assets, and to thoughtfully cultivate community-based recommendations in a cultural planning process.

Challenges present in designing the course ranged from the shifting alignment of the pace and demands of an active research project compared to the pace and demands of a quarter term academic calendar, to understanding the differences in context and the related implications of a laboratory-based versus a "real-world" research experience. I was (and remain) curious about how the course's long-term impact on students might be assessed, as well as whether it would be possible to engage students in the community beyond the duration of the course. Lastly, I struggled with whether or how the community might have been able to be directly involved in the laboratory aspects of the course, and the repercussions that involvement could have to the integrity of the research effort and the budding community relationships established through it.

### **Students' Reflections and Analysis**

Students' considerations of their experiences in the class, obtained through class discussions and a reflective assignment at the end of the course, provide evidence of the ways in which the experiential lab and other components of the course impacted their understanding of community and cultural planning. Their comments illustrate attempts to contend with challenges presented to their personal understanding of art, its role in communities, their professional role and responsibilities as arts leaders, and the context of culture, place, and organizational identity. In keeping with the goal to provide a safe space for personal reflection throughout the experience, all students' comments are presented anonymously here.

One change in perception I observed through the comments was a shift in the way students understood that the context of place, identity and community culture cannot be substituted with or fully understood by anything other than direct experience and exploration in a community. Their quotes to this effect reflect this understanding, as well as the value of Borrup's asset-based approach to community and cultural assessment:

I could read Tom Borrup's and Arlene Goldbard's theories and analyses for months and still not develop truly meaningful or actionable goals for a cultural plan until I understood a community itself and its values.

Walking through the streets of Mantua and Powelton Village also left a lasting impression. When I visited the area, I saw little evidence of food and health resources. I saw abandoned buildings, vacant lots, and litter, but I also saw a sense of community.... When I initially thought about the research area, I unfortunately could not think of any real strengths, but as the weeks went on and we began to participate in the Research Lab activities, class discussions, and weekly readings, I realized that there were many under-capitalized strengths that could be utilized as a catalyst for change.

It occurred to me that the most critical consideration in cultural planning is examining what kind of art and culture will most benefit a community in its current state and learning what type of assets already exist.

While planning is useful in and of itself, there is an intangible character to be honored in neighborhoods that is more difficult to pinpoint.

One of the most powerful concepts of the class that we applied in the process of determining our class recommendations and will shape my thinking for similar projects is Borrup's asset-driven approach. This seems like a given in other contexts—as a management principle, for example—but when you're looking at the kind of statistics Mantua has and the kind of combustible situation Drexel's construction projects create, it's so easy to pick out what's wrong instead of basing your assessment on assets.

Students clearly responded to the opportunity the lab exercises afforded to examine data gathered from the community for the research project, noting that, “[i]t is one thing to read and learn about the area, but quite another to actually hear the voices of the residents and movers and shakers of the area,” and, “it was so helpful to hear directly from residents of the neighborhoods. I learned about their real concerns and what efforts are already underway in the area.” This exposure extended to their understanding of university-community relations, and Drexel's role in how the surrounding community is perceived by its students. As one of the students who took the course and served as a member of the research team noted:

I feel so much more connected to how Drexel fits into the community and to neighborhood current events. I spent three of the five quarters of the program with a vague awareness of the surrounding neighborhood coming from university text alerts about robberies and shootings; it makes every kind of difference when I had the opportunity to build relationships with our neighbors.

Throughout the process, students were also challenged to question what art is, and what its role, function, and value is in a community that may be markedly different than other communities they have known. Their comments here speak to considerations raised by Zitcer et al regarding whether the arts can be regarded as a capability, a part the group of human rights and freedoms necessary to flourish as a human being, a theory introduced by Amartya Sen in the 1980s (2015). Capabilities theory extends the idea that the freedom to choose among different options to develop capabilities and to determine the well-being they will provide should exist for all individuals (Crocker and Robeyns 2009; Sen 1993). When applied to the arts, this can be taken to indicate that the value of the arts is fundamentally tied to the individual and community context in which the arts exist and are accessed by people. In the following reflections, students demonstrate a growing awareness that art and its value to one's life and the life of one's community may well be located, like beauty, in the eye of the beholder:

I also found my focus group very interesting, as one of the very first questions (within the first few minutes of the focus group) was, “Well, what do you mean by ‘art’?”

This course broadened my thoughts and challenged my ideas of the ways in which the arts can be transformative.

My idea of “the arts” has changed and especially as a result of this course.

Art means something different to everyone.

This realization of the value of art as it relates to community and individual context extended into students’ broadening awareness of engagement in the planning process, and the ethical choices, responsibilities, and dynamics bound up within it. Their understanding of this reflects the suggestions of Dewey (2004; 2005) and Sikes (2000), and was informed by the work of Goldbard (2010), and by that of Stern and Seifert (2007; 2008; 2010).

Probably most importantly, I realized that arts and culture mean different things to different people, even within the same community. Even the same history can mean different things to different people. All these factors must be considered when creating a community cultural plan.

Prior to starting this course, I may have had some ideas as to the basics of a cultural plan, but I certainly wasn’t thinking of many of the crucial first steps that must be taken prior to implementing a plan.... Somehow, I never once thought about how the people who were already in the community felt about the planning process. Does the plan serve everyone in the community or only a select group? I also never gave any thought as to how difficult it can be to simply get that input from the community.

Students encountered another challenge in observing different points of view about whether, and if so how, the arts are in fact valuable to all individuals.

It was a humbling moment to hear that the residents of Mantua and Powelton Village largely do not consider the arts as a necessity in their lives, because they have basic needs unable to be met. This is not to say that the research lab activities failed to identify the arts as a key component of our eventual cultural plan – these community members recognize the benefit of the arts for specific populations such as the elderly and youth. They also value the arts as a community builder itself and while drill teams and block parties may not fulfill an artistic mission for a grant application, there is a transformative impact informal arts have on the residents of Mantua and Powelton Village and I truly believe learning this made a substantial impact on us as future arts administrators.

It also made me realize that while I see the arts as crucial to improving education and communities, this is not a belief shared by everyone.

These observations about differing perspectives on the value of the arts naturally extended to considerations of professional responsibility to look beyond the needs and interests of any single arts organization that one might work for or represent, and to consider the duty arts professionals have when working in nonprofit organizations to fully consider an organization’s role and impact in its community. Borwick, whose writing students were assigned to read for the course, likewise urges consideration of these responsibilities (2012).

Students were also confronted with a complexity of arts advocacy that they had not previously encountered, namely: How does one advocate on behalf of those who may perceive the value of what

you are advocating for differently? How do you advocate for something if you yourself are questioning its value and role to the communities you are aiming to support through that advocacy?

It is now my perspective that non-profit arts organizations have a responsibility, as tax-exempt entities, to provide opportunities for every class of their community. I previously believed that non-profit organizations primarily offered outreach programs for the sake of receiving grant money, but I now have a deeper appreciation for the promise of outreach programs.

Going forward, in any position I hold, I will always try to help underserved audiences connect with art. I will look for ways to strengthen my organization's connection with the community and consider its position in the larger cultural ecosystem.

How can we advocate for the arts when so many don't see arts or culture as crucial to our society? How do the arts stand a chance for government support when there are so many programs that address basic human needs that also require funding?

In grappling with these questions, students reflected on their own experiences in the arts, leading to a deeper understanding of the bias they bring to community and cultural planning efforts, as well as a commitment to "buy local" in support of the communities where they live. This also reflects Goldbard's emphasis on the context of community (2010).

I can remember, as a young child, going to the art museum with my mother and grandmother. I can remember taking the train to Philadelphia to see plays and my weekly art lessons after school. I took this for granted for many years. I did not realize how lucky I was to have so many opportunities to engage in the arts.

This course has also made me consider how I participate in arts and culture. I am someone, like many people in Mantua and Powelton Village, who also goes elsewhere to engage in arts and culture. This course has made me aware of that and it is something that I want to change. While I still plan to travel to see my favorite museums and shows, I want to experience the arts in my own neighborhood. By engaging in the arts in my own community, I will not only get to experience great local talent, but support the larger, local ecosystem.

In the end, students exhibited the realization that cultural planning is ultimately not about the arts, but about the community the arts exist within. This realization is representative of the theoretical underpinnings of the course (Borrup 2011; Dreezen 1998; Mercer 1991; Mercer 2005), and reflective of the challenges students confronted throughout the laboratory exercises.

I now better understand that community cultural planning considers the community as a whole with the arts integrated into that landscape and into the eventual plan – the arts are not the sole focus of a community cultural plan, whether it is an assessment, a comprehensive-specific plan, or a specialized arts plan. If there is one aspect of community and cultural planning that I understand more fully it is that the arts cannot exist in a silo.

Over the past three months, my understanding of community cultural planning has drastically changed. I originally thought that most of the research would focus on the art activity (or lack of) in the focus area.

I thought community cultural planning was more specific to developing the arts in communities, not taking into consideration the full ecosystem a community exists within.

I was a bit of skeptic when I signed up for the class because my understanding of community cultural planning was associated with the concept of gentrification. I was also a bit baffled as to how you go about engaging disadvantaged residents in the arts and cultural scene in Philadelphia. Every statistic that I had encountered in graduate school led me to believe that this faction of the population did not have the means to participate in the arts nor the inherent inclination to partake....I had really never taken the time to think about arts involvement in underprivileged communities and I therefore had a skewed perception of how you measure the success of arts engagement. I learned that engaging the members of the community in the arts does not mean that the ultimate goal should result in attendance at the Kimmel Center.

This focus on community rather than purely on the arts within it can also be seen in a class assignment regarding the definition of cultural planning. Students were asked to develop their own explanation of the terminology, a discussion ultimately resulting in a description that evolved over time. Their first take, developed in the first week of class after reading the definitions presented in Table 1, described cultural planning as, “a strategic plan for a community's culture, to strengthen that community,” emphasizing culture as the prominent framing of the work while acknowledging that there is a broader underlying motivation to do so. Students were asked to return to and reconsider this initial definition each week. Over time, a more nuanced version, describing cultural planning as “a strategic plan to emphasize and celebrate the cultural identity of a community, as part of community development,” emerged. This second definition recognizes their reflections on Borrup’s notion of asset-based community cultural planning (2011), and their struggle with word choices, such as “strengthen” versus “develop,” whose intent can be perceived differently depending on who has the power to choose them. This was informed by their experiences in the lab and their discussions after considering readings from Goldbard (2010) and Stern and Seifert (2007; 2008; 2010). In the final personal reflection exercise, one student removed the word “arts” entirely from the definition, placing full emphasis on a community’s context, the identification of its assets, and those assets’ role in advancing community progress:

I would revise our initial definition of community cultural planning....community cultural planning is: the study of an area’s key assets, both physical and abstract, that identifies opportunities for integration of these assets to aid in the overall development of a community.

Lastly, as previously noted, two of the students in the course were also directly involved in the research project. Their reflections illustrate the value of being involved in both aspects of the work simultaneously:

The immediate value of the course that emerged for me was about taking the time to have larger-picture conversations about the research project that I wasn’t having as a student employee because we were so much engaged in the work process.

Working on the project and taking the class concurrently meant that I was taking extra time on the class assignment side on activities that helped inform me as a researcher.

## **Conclusion**

Though it is clear that students expanded their understanding of culture’s role in and value to communities, and their own responsibilities as arts administrators therein, some lingering questions

remained for me at the conclusion of the experience. Primary among these was grappling with the irony present in the final assignment: After exposing students to data and theory that compelled them to regard the inclusion of community members throughout the process as a critical foundation for a cultural planning effort, the final assignment for the course asked them to develop a hypothetical cultural plan, where they essentially sat together in a room without anyone from the community they were planning for present, and drew up a cultural plan for that community. This, in fact, was one reason the assignment's output was not considered to be part of the research project. Students understood that the process of the developing the final assignment was more of an opportunity to sift and sort through their own impressions and ideas, than a chance to participate in a community and cultural planning process that adhered to the best practices they studied in the course. Yet, I feel that this aspect of the experiential aims of the course fell short, because while students were able to hear the voices of community members, they were not able to work with the community to anywhere near the same extent as the research project team. Perhaps if the timeline of the course had been extended and more closely aligned with the research project, a more grounded, and therefore applicable or useful, final assignment experience could have occurred with the involvement of the community.

Other questions regarding how to further develop this experience remain, as well. Grappling with the paradox of the final assignment led me to consider if there might have been other ways to involve the community in the course. I am interested in finding out how students from the course, two and half years later, now view their experiences within it. Has it had any impact beyond the term in which they were enrolled? I found it challenging to recognize ways to keep the students connected to the community after the conclusion of the course and the research project. I also struggled to identify other active research projects whose data might be incorporated in the same manner, as laboratory fodder for students to explore, in other courses I teach.

As Silka noted, “[o]utreach scholarship often depends on finding innovative ways to integrate teaching, research, and professional service,” (2000, 29). This case study, pairing an active community-based research project with a community and cultural planning course, serves as one example of the potential of this work to integrate a professor's three-part professional agenda as well as to provide students opportunities to expand their personal understanding of art, of the arts' role in communities, of their role and responsibilities as arts professionals, and of the context of culture, place, and organizational identity in their work. It is my hope that this example serves as a means to support other professors interested in the pursuit of similar goals.

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