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ArtShow: Youth and Community Development: A Review

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A Review by Karen Springsteen



Heath, Shirley Brice and Laura Smyth. *ArtShow: Youth and Community Development*. Washington, D.C.: Partners for Livable Communities. 1999. ISBN: 0941182525.

Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words* (1983) inspired many of us in composition studies to examine and value the different ways in which communities and classrooms are connected. In the documentary and resource guide *ArtShow: Youth and Community Development* (1999) Heath, with Laura Smyth, continues to elaborate the importance of community in literacy work. While many scholars working in community literacy are familiar with tutoring-based or prison-based projects, Heath and Smyth's art-based approach may offer something new.

In a very practical way, the resource guide provides descriptions and photographs of innovative programs that join youth and their communities in organizations where young people and supportive adults learn, teach, and create, as well as build economic opportunity for youth in their own neighborhoods. For example, the resource guide includes case studies of Student Illustrators in Cotati, CA, a program in which students are hired to do graphic design for their fellow students and teachers and are compensated with art supplies, museum trips, and concerts; Artists for Humanity in Boston, MA where people aged 14–18 are paid to produce commercial art such as T-shirts for the Red Sox, murals for Fleet Bank, and calendars for regional groups; the Kentucky Center Governor's School for the Arts initiative in Louisville, where students from across the state participate in "artshops" on, for example, the connections between dance and creative writing; and The Point Community Development Corporation in the South Bronx, NY which houses a working theater, dance studio and silk-screening business, and has community members of all ages streaming in and out, taking and teaching classes, and using the center as a gathering place.

In addition to these inspiring examples and illustrations, Heath and Smyth also describe a fresh theoretical approach to the role of youth in community work. Starting from the assumptions that 1) school, family, and religious institutions should not be the only sources

of learning for young people, and 2) young people are often falsely represented as dangerous or apathetic, Heath and Smyth challenge readers to rethink the attitudes and aspirations we may have previously associated with youth in regard to their education and responsibilities as citizens. The young people featured in this resource guide are not stereotyped as “at risk” or “in need.” They are shown working shoulder-to-shoulder with peers and adults alike, taking responsibility for the moral, civic, and aesthetic climates of their communities. The guiding question for this version of youth and community development is not *what do you need*, but *what can you do?* By demonstrating that young people are resources for their communities and capable partners, Heath and Smyth offer a powerful view of the role youth can play in communities that need creative initiative, positive energy, and imaginative new directions.

One may ask, what exactly do art-based youth and community development projects have to do with “literacy”? In a traditional sense, Heath and Smyth explain that “through the multiple roles they must play, young people have to produce many different kinds of writing—from invitations and schedules to book jackets, vignettes, and roasts. They write as individuals and as a group; they script their plays, press releases, program notes, and thank-you letters to funders.” In other words, there is a salient verbal atmosphere around art-based projects. There is also a resonance of “school literacy” as Heath and Smyth emphasize activities like reflection, demonstration, explanation, small-group work, one-on-one attention, careful looking and listening, and increased vocabulary and imaginative capabilities. Finally, Heath and Smyth point out that “involvement in the arts demands fluency and facility with varieties of oral performances, literacies, and media projections”—a claim that will surely interest readers connected to the current emphasis on multimodality and multiliteracies in composition studies.

In an effort to make this resource guide generative rather than prescriptive, Heath and Smyth end by sharing a host of questions and responses about their work, as well as an annotated bibliography that will be useful for readers interested in mixing art and enterprise, developing partnerships between young people and adults, and involving a wider range of modalities in community literacy work.

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