

Community Arts Training Institute
Collaborative and Rigorous Assessment: The St. Louis Regional Arts Commission's Community Arts Training Institute
Assessing the Practices of Public Scholarship

Introduction

The Community Arts Training (CAT) Institute, in the words of its parent organization, the St. Louis Regional Arts Commission (RAC), aspires to “transform St. Louis into a more vibrant, creative and economically thriving community through elevating the vitality, value and visibility of the arts.” To achieve this, CAT is designed to be a co-creative educational forum that brings artists, social service providers, community activists, policy makers, and educators together to develop innovative and impactful community-based art programs. The CAT Institute has become a nationally recognized model for community-based art and community development.

Yet its organizers and founders questioned whether it was having the intended impacts on its participants and St. Louis communities more generally. They therefore began a rigorous, phased assessment project that entailed multiple methods and a highly collaborative data collection process that is already having generative impacts for the CAT Institute, its alumni, and their community collaborators. This case study therefore highlights the ideals of **rigor**, **generativity**, and **collaboration**.

The following summary draws from interviews and communications with CAT Institute Director Roseann Weiss, and Shelly Goebel-Parker, a professor of art therapy counseling at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville and a CAT alumna who conducted much of the assessment research. It also benefited from the generous comments of Lisa Harper Chang, Education Programs Manager of the St. Louis RAC. An important note: the CAT Institute assessment has three phases, the latter two of which will be the subject of a separate publication. Therefore, this case study focuses on Phase One, with a necessarily brief and general discussion of subsequent phases.

Context

The CAT Institute is an “innovative program centered on the belief that art has the power to be an agent for positive social change.” The RAC encourages art, innovation, and community development by providing grants, informational resources, and other supportive services for area artists, including the documentation and mapping of public art projects, the development of curriculum kits for teachers in arts education, and publicity and network opportunities. Most notably, the RAC not only champions art for art’s sake, but regards art to be a means to community development and enrichment, as is demonstrated in its “Rustbelt to Artist Belt”

convenings for community revitalization, the study of the economic impact of the arts, and, most relevant to this story, the CAT Institute.



CAT began in 1997 through the leadership of Executive Director Jill McGuire, Ann Haubrich, and the initial core faculty, including William Cleveland, Director of the Center for Study of Art and Community; Porter Arneill, former RAC staffer; Maggie Hourd Bryan, social worker; and Jane Ellen Ibur, writer and educator. To foster innovative community-based art, the CAT Institute consists of a five-month, 55-hour curriculum of intensive two-day sessions that include experiential education in the community and writing assignments. This learning experience is focused upon the development of a wide variety of skills: community-based arts practice, partnership development, mediation and conflict resolution, teaching and learning, public relations, fund raising, assessment, and advocacy. This curriculum is followed by ongoing professional development opportunities for CAT alums. Each annual institute

consists of 16 CAT fellows—eight artists working in all disciplines and eight community workers—who are selected through a nomination, application, and interview process.

To date, CAT has well over 200 graduates who live and work in the St. Louis area, and who have innovated numerous programs. One example is the Arts CollaboARTive, an effort to document through art the lives of clients of the transitional housing organization Peter & Paul Community Services, representing biographical stories of the transition from homelessness to independent living. Another is the Arts Program at the St. Louis City Juvenile Detention Center, which grew directly from the CAT Institute and provides opportunities for youth to participate in hands-on art workshops such as African drumming, hip hop poetry, and circus performance. Yet another program is Project Common Ground, created by a consortium of Community Health-in-Partnership Services, Metro Theater, and the Center for Survivors of Torture and War Trauma to help adolescent refugees from Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Bosnia, as well as African-American teens, explore their similarities and differences through art. These and many other community art programs and projects have been a source of pride for CAT Institute organizers and participants.

However, in the course of successive institutes CAT organizers and participants were concerned about the successes of the program and a common question arose: What impact is the CAT

Institute curriculum having on its fellows, and, indirectly, the programs, organizations, and communities with which they work?

Rigorous and Collaborative Assessment

The **rigorous** assessment research involved multiple methods—including two surveys, interviewing, and spatial mapping—over three coordinated phases designed to offer detailed qualitative and spatial data on the impacts of the CAT Institute. For all phases of the research, Shelly Goebel-Parker defined “impact” broadly as “a strong effect with something changed as a result.” The first and second phases have been completed but the third has yet to be finalized. Phase One involved a survey sent out to 150 CAT Institute Fellows via Internet and paper formats to identify and offer a preliminary assessment of personal and program impacts. Phase Two focused on broader community impacts of the CAT Institute, and involved extended, semi-structured interviews with St. Louis community members, as well as a mapping project. Phase Three included a more extensive and refined survey of CAT fellows.

Phase One’s goals were to begin to identify and operationalize various dimensions of impact on the CAT fellows personally, the fellow’s programs, their organizations, and their broader community. Practically, Phase One consisted of a survey, which was constructed largely through the work of Shelly Goebel-Parker with input from CAT faculty and staff, including CAT alumni from various St. Louis communities. Goebel-Parker began with discussions with CAT organizers and alumni about the goals of the CAT institute and what they would like to know about its impacts. She then designed the survey with support from colleagues at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Since Phase One was administered to the CAT alumni, it focused primarily on the immediate impacts CAT had on their personal development and that of the programs they created. The survey assessed whether the training itself was meaningful for CAT alumni and resonant in their community work. CAT Director Roseann Weiss is quick to state that even this assessment of personal transformation has yielded information that is helpful in assessing broader community impact. First, the assessment of community reach is always a first step in community assessment.



Second, and more importantly, because half of the CAT alumni work in community development and social service, the institute's influence on their personal development is likely to have significant impact on the communities they serve.

Once the survey was complete, Weiss asked Goebel-Parker to implement and analyze the survey independently of CAT, so as to eliminate any real or perceived bias. Goebel-Parker distributed the survey via mail and email to 150 CAT alumni and received 95 respondents (a 63 percent response rate). Of these, 77.9 percent stated that they learned new skills and knowledge at the CAT Institute. Further, all of the respondents stated that CAT did meet its goals of helping to bring artists and community workers/service providers together to understand each other, to learn strategies for teaching and assessment, to provide active engagement through a rigorous mentor-based curriculum, and to provide ongoing support for CAT fellows in their community-based work. As evidence of their alliances and **collaboration**, 75.8 percent of CAT fellows indicated they have had contact with other CAT fellows, while 73.7 percent report they have worked directly with one or more CAT alums on a program or project. To assess the breadth of these collaborations, the survey asked how many CAT alums had contact with eight or more of their CAT peers. The results were that nearly half (49.3 percent) have had contact with eight or more fellows, and over a quarter (27 percent) have had working relations with eight or more fellows. This suggests CAT is indeed having a significant personal impact on its fellows insofar as it is informing, supporting, and connecting them so that they may work productively together.

For Phase Two, the goal was to better assess the impact of the training on the individuals who emerged from CAT and, in turn, their impacts on their organizations and community, positive and negative, so as to provide formative feedback for improvements in the program. To get this information, interviews were conducted with various community members who had not participated in the CAT Institute but had extensive knowledge of the region, the field of community arts, and of course the organizations and communities with whom the CAT alumni worked. In doing so, community members were given a voice in the assessment and ensured a more **reciprocal** and **collaborative** process that mirrors the broad goals of the CAT Institute itself. Goebel-Parker hired an interviewer with an internal research support grant from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. The interviewer conducted and audio recorded twelve interviews, which Goebel-Parker then transcribed to allow for detailed analysis. Goebel-Parker then hired with her own funds a graduate student to help code and analyze the transcripts, and gave a brief summary of the principal themes to CAT Director Weiss. This enabled Weiss to implement any necessary changes to the institute for the coming year. Phase Two also incorporated a spatial mapping project that plotted where CAT alumni have worked and on what projects, to establish a greater sense of spatial reach and any clustering of projects that occurred in the communities of St. Louis.

These data helped to shape Phase Three's survey of CAT fellows, which, according to Goebel-Parker, endeavored "to gather a less abstract, sometimes quantifiable image of impact." The

data from Phases Two and Three have been collected and are the subject of forthcoming conference presentations and publications by both Roseann Weiss and Shelly Goebel-Parker.

While this research has been extensive and time consuming, Weiss argues that this **rigorous** assessment is necessary, with all of its emphases on qualitative detail, quantitative breadth, valid questioning and analysis, reliable data gathering, continuous implementation, and reflexive processes that apply what is learned to new programs. If the CAT Institute is to be a reflective and impactful program, Weiss emphasized this form of assessment must be **collaborative** and inclusive of all stakeholders.

Assessment Results: Generativity and Continued Collaboration

These assessment methods have been **generative**, already having shaped how the CAT Institute is organized in four specific ways, each of which have enhanced efforts at greater **collaboration**.



First, respondents to Phase One’s survey commented upon the difficult dialogues that occurred in the CAT Institute regarding power, privilege, and race, and how, although extremely valuable, they often devolved into personalized tensions between participants. In response, CAT Institute organizers have implemented a new curriculum around these subjects through the use of literature (e.g., Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*), film (e.g., *Push*), simulations (e.g., *StarPower* by R. Garry Shirts), and paired sonnet writing exercises that allow participants to share personal narratives in more contemplative and productive ways. Preliminary assessments of these changes suggest that they have allowed for greater personal explorations of difference and deeper **collaborations** among the fellows.

Second, CAT alumni stated that they would enjoy opportunities to connect their community projects and programs in St. Louis to a larger national movement for community art. Weiss saw such involvement in networks of artists, educators, and community activists throughout the United States as crucial to helping CAT participants generate new program and project ideas. It would also help them to gain a sense of legitimacy, or, in Weiss’s words, “validation,” in their lives as community artists, since they occupy a secondary status in the art world. The result was the involvement of CAT participants and alumni in national conferences on community art,

including the 2010 “At the Crossroads: Community Arts and Development” and the 2012 “Rustbelt to Artist Belt” convenings, all of which improved opportunities for professional **collaborations** with their peers across the nation.

Third, CAT alumni wanted an opportunity to have ongoing professional development and to continue community-building efforts with their fellow alumni. In response, CAT organizers created the “Tiger” program for CAT graduates, in which twelve alumni work intensively to document, research, and hone some element of their practice. This has broadened and deepened **collaborations** among CAT alumni and their communities through a variety of programs.

Lastly, CAT alumni reported that many of their allies in St. Louis communities would like to have similar training but that there were barriers to participation, such as limited time and inadequate transportation, among others. In 2012, to address this need and develop new community arts efforts, CAT embarked upon the Neighborhood-Based CAT Institute in the Pagedale community in North St. Louis, a neighborhood that is already home to CAT alumni and a well-developed partnership with the social service organization Beyond Housing. The curriculum underwent revision, to better focus on the needs of local participants and Pagedale. This effort has shown promise to garner greater local participation in community arts programs and to work effectively across sectors of art, education, and community advocacy. This is a model Weiss would like to replicate in other communities in future years, beginning with two Neighborhood-Based CAT Institutes in 2013–14. These efforts could allow for deeper **collaborations** between CAT fellows (past and present) and community partners, which would allow for more localized goals and more impactful projects.

Phase One has been **generative** of multiple forms of **collaboration**—among CAT fellows and CAT alumni, between CAT fellows and their peers across the nation, and between community members and CAT fellows. Phases Two and Three, while not the subject of this case, have the potential to gather even more useful information from CAT fellows and their community partners, and could generate even more impactful collaborations over time.

Challenges: Tensions between Rigor and Practicability


In reflecting upon the CAT Institute assessment, Director Weiss expressed gratitude for the many resources that have made this research possible, particularly the **collaborations** of knowledgeable CAT alumni and community members who helped to clarify goals and methods, ensuring that the research was intellectually **rigorous** and that it yielded meaningful results. She noted with great appreciation the work of Shelly Goebel-Parker, who had experience in survey research and could act as an independent consultant.

However, Weiss and Goebel-Parker do describe challenges that the RAC faces in conducting rigorous and still **practicable** assessment, lessons that are likely to be instructive for similar efforts. First, to do detailed and thorough forms of assessment with high validity and reliability requires great resources of time and labor. Indeed, assessment research can be time consuming—the CAT Institute’s process took four years—since survey construction, implementation, and analysis alone can take years. Qualitative research is even more time-intensive. This



research is especially time-consuming when it relies upon volunteer labor and is, as Goebel-Parker described it, “extra” work for those involved. Second, **rigor** is made more difficult by the fact that there are many intervening factors between a program like CAT and the indicators of community development, including anything from the personal qualities of CAT alumni to the resources and opportunities that exist in their target communities. To assess this requires an emphasis on highly qualitative research that can uncover the idiosyncratic and multiple factors that mediate the CAT curriculum and its many community impacts. The labor of interviewing, transcribing, and analyzing qualitative and spatial data such as this can be very time- and resource-intensive. Given these three factors, it becomes clear that the goals of **rigor** and **practicability** are sometimes in conflict, unless the assessment is more limited in goals and scope, and unless assessment efforts can find the human and financial resources necessary.

Both Weiss and Goebel-Parker suggested some guidelines for those undertaking similar assessments to make them more **practicable**. First, Goebel-Parker advised not to do the work alone, but instead find at least one other experienced researcher who is capable of understanding the scope of the project. Weiss confessed that, if she were to do this assessment again, she would have hired an assistant to help Goebel-Parker in her work rather than allowing Goebel-Parker to hire assistants herself. Second, plan the tasks purposefully into your everyday work and budget. Third, it is important to not simply use assessments to revise programs but to document and publicize the results broadly among all of a program’s community partners and their professional organizations to promote greater **collaboration** in the reflection and innovation necessary for successful programs in the future. Lastly, do not reinvent the wheel, but seek out those in your communities and professions who have expertise in the research questions that drive the assessment. Indeed, this will save time and offer opportunities to share resources. Goebel-Parker suggests that organizational partnerships between community agencies and universities can help them to find the expertise, labor, and other resource necessary for assessment.



In summary, the CAT Institute’s assessment process has reflected many values of **rigorous** assessment. It involves a methodology that is appropriate to the CAT Institute’s goals and generally proportionate to the institute’s scope of activity. It demonstrates a multi-method strategy that collects a diverse array of valid and reliable data, and it does so in a way that is **generative** of an ongoing improvement of the institute. The time-consuming and resource-intensive processes that rigorous assessment requires can limit the **practicability** of the assessment. The assessment has been the product of a **collaboration** between CAT organizers, alumni, and community partners, and many of the results so far have enhanced the possibilities for more effective programs and more robust community engagement. With further iterations of program implementation and assessment, the CAT Institute demonstrates greater potential to reach its goals of transforming “St. Louis into a more vibrant, creative and economically thriving community through elevating the vitality, value and visibility of the arts.”