



Create Community Connections

Articulating the Benefits of the Arts

Those for whom the arts have deep meaning have difficulty understanding/relating to people for whom that is not the case. This is especially true when it comes to articulating why the arts are important. To simply say that there is something “ineffable” about the arts will yield nothing but blank stares from those who are not already “believers.” However, some of the more readily understood talking points (economic impact, educational support, health outcomes, etc.) have, arguably, been promoted beyond their actual merit and do not speak to the true reasons people are drawn to the arts.

While it is daunting to wade into this topic, a distinction between core and ancillary benefits might be of use. The core benefits of the arts are those that enhance the human spirit and improve social relationships. To further refine the concept, for individuals the arts provide (or enhance) internal congruence—self-understanding, self-acceptance, identity, and pleasure to name a few. Between individuals, the arts aid relational alignment—facilitating relationship building and understanding. In the community/society context, the arts foster social capital—both bonding among people of similar interests and backgrounds and bridging across lines of difference.

Ancillary benefits, in contrast and simply put, are all the benefits that do not fit in those categories. Among these, of course, are cognitive enhancement, improved health, and economic development, to name a few. These are valuable to individuals and/or communities but are not the *most* important roles of the arts.

This core/ancillary classification of benefits addresses the arts community’s discomfort with the emphasis placed on, for example, economic arguments for the arts. It can also satisfy the essence of the “arts for arts sake” position without forcing a focus on the arts rather than on their benefits for people. The mission of arts organizations can then be envisioned as doing things that impact people’s lives in ways they cannot help but see.

To summarize:

Core Benefits of the Arts: those that enhance the human spirit or improve social relationships

- **For individuals the arts provide (or enhance) *internal congruence*** [*e.g.*, self-understanding, self-acceptance, identity, and pleasure]
- **Between individuals, the arts aid *relational alignment*** [facilitating relationship building and understanding]
- **In the community/society context, the arts *foster social capital*** [both bonding among people of similar interests and backgrounds and bridging across lines of difference]

Ancillary Benefits of the Arts: all other forms of benefit