

Inviting others to join us GLEEfully
by John R. Killacky

With the GLEE frenzy making choruses hip and sexy, along with celebrating difference in all its characters, what can we do to broaden interest in our choral movement? Lessons learned from other arts organizations about successful audience engagement through understanding values and motivations and experiments in co-authoring of meaning to expand participation are explored.

Twenty years ago I was working at Walker Art Center and Chorus America had its annual conference in Minneapolis. I was asked to keynote, and I spoke about what I perceived as the false bifurcation between professional and amateur. I reminded folks that the original meaning of “masterwork” was work made by a student for the teacher, and, in previous centuries, amateur musicians were deemed loftier than those paid to play.

I encouraged those assembled to commission new works with themes reflective of our time. To illustrate my points, I invited the Twin Cities Men’s Chorus to sing a newly commissioned work by Craig Carnahan. This occasion also marked the Twin Cities Men’s Chorus coming out with its new name: Twin Cities Gay Men’s Chorus.

I was told my talk was controversial and provocative, and three years later, when GALA came to Minneapolis, I was asked to again challenge assumptions from my perspective. The AIDS pandemic was decimating our ranks and I was concerned that our choruses were not commissioning new works by queer composers on elegiac themes; rather we were too celebratory with our Broadway reviews.

I also spoke about how it seemed like an oxymoron that so many GALA choruses did not have the name Gay or Lesbian in them.

Why did we choose to gather together and then obscure our identities to the outside world?

That talk did not go so well. Dinner speakers are supposed to be festive, and I was not. So I am thrilled to be invited to come again and speak before GALA. Much has happened in the intervening years. We have much to celebrate. Like many others, I am now legally married and state-by-state queer civil rights are being affirmed.

I am not here to talk about legal and social issues, but cultural ones. A recent National Endowment for the Arts' report on participation show us that attendance is down, but participation is up--participation meaning people actually participating in the creative act themselves rather than merely witnessing the creativity of others. Of course Gay and Lesbian choruses are the embodiment of this trend; always have been.

Participatory Media

More pertinent to our conversation today is a June 2010 NEA report, "Audience 2.0: How Technology Influences Arts Participation," noting the growth of audiences accessing the arts through the media. Despite fears that electronics would cannibalize audiences, the study found electronic consumers were more than twice as likely to attend performances than non-media consumers.

The study also showed that nearly three-fourths of adults who reported using the internet to access the arts, reported doing so at least once a day. More than half, 52% reported participating in arts performances via the internet at least once a week.

- 84% used the internet to obtain arts information,
- 71% to create art,

- 65% to view visual arts,
- 41.5% read articles, essays, or blogs online, and
- 37% viewed or listened to a recorded or live broadcasted jazz, classical music, opera, or dance performance.

This reality is something I am thinking a lot about these days as the Executive Director of Flynn Center for the Performing Arts. We present year-round performances and educational programs for 200,000 people and we are exploring ways of using new technologies to change our online platform from a transactional to transformative and participatory aesthetic space.

The Emergent Media Center at Champlain College will be a conceptual partner in this process. Their students have grown up completely immersed in a digital world and assume this will be the norm going forward, so it is vital to include this age group in our planning.

As we envision moving into a Web 3.0 environment, (where the meaning of data becomes more important and intelligent searching makes the web more personalized based on user preferences, behavior, and individual sovereignty), it is crucial to engage our multiple constituents in new and resonant technological ways.

Ultimately my goal is to have people' curiosity whetted online, hoping this in turn expands and deepens their engagement to the Flynn. However, this does not mean merely adding bells and whistles to our website, but calls for a paradigm shift in thinking about what cultural participation means for our audiences, live and viral.

Ben Cameron, Program Director of the Arts Program at the Doris Duke Foundation, recently visited the online class I teach for

Drexel University. He talked about the differences and change in perspectives that are needed:

Are you trying to merely broadcast information to a group to attend a rigidly pre-defined set of opportunities? Are you connecting audiences with one another? With artists? Are you providing forums where people can register how they feel about the work they see? Are you sharing that response with others--and truly sharing, NOT censoring out unfavorable comments (which distinguishes an authentic site from a marketing site--and consumers smell the difference in a second!) Are you being aggressive about earned income assumptions--and creating accessible entry points? Are you marketing to groups or making relationships with groups?

No longer can we merely invite audiences to attend a performance, consumers are drawn to an arts experience in which they can participate. The experience does not begin and end at the performance curtain, but long before and after: at home, in the lobby, online, and sharing with friends. Technological advances are helping all of us develop effective enrichment programs capable of actually responding to the needs and desires of our audiences.

A Nielsen Company study last month detailed that Americans now spend nearly a third of their time online communicating and networking across social networks, blogs, personal email, and instant messaging. However, email is in third place with an 8.3% share, behind online gaming (10.2% share) and social networks garnering 22.7%. This is significant: social networking represents a 43% increase from one year ago, while emailing is down 28%.

Just as kids no longer need a watch because of cell phones, in our lifetime emailing may be supplanted by social networking and instant messaging. Remember when emailing was new? I am so

old I still know that cc on the bottom of a letter refers to “carbon copy,” although it apparently now means “courtesy copy.”

A new study released last week from the Pew Internet & American Life Project shows that more and more older adults are also using these tools. According to the report, use of social networks among people older than 50 went from 22 percent to 42 percent from April 2009 and May 2010. (The figures include only people who use the Internet.). The jump was particularly big among those older than 65.

To keep our choruses relevant and vital, we need to go where are audiences are congregating. We all know how potent word of mouth is on box office, so it seems essential that we marshal the power of social networking and interactive media toward our choruses.

Here are a few illustrative examples of how arts organizations are adapting and adopting technology to deepen audience participation:

The New York Philharmonic has its own Apple iPhone application, and encourages text-messaging donations, even in \$5 increments. Audiences for the New York Phil and Indianapolis Symphony text message choices for encores.

Pittsburgh’s Symphony Orchestra mounted a screen on the side of the proscenium displaying factoids about the music, the conductor, featured composers, the hall and upcoming events. Text messages were displayed before the concert, between pieces, during intermission, but not while the music was playing.

Cell phone texts at New York’s Symphony Space determined who would marry whom in the wedding scene in a revisionary “Cosi fan Tutte.” The Chicago Opera Theater raised \$33,000 by having

audiences pay \$1 a vote to select one of the operas for the 2011 season.

Pittsburgh's New Music Ensemble subscribers meet digitally off-season; engaging with staff about artistic decision-making, and sharing audio and video files. This is not about buying tickets, but increasing audience buy-in to the organization.

Allowing audiences to participate more deeply does not just have to be only through our online portals. Vermont Symphony Orchestra auctioned an opportunity for a donor to conduct a short piece as part of their outdoor 4th of July outdoor concert. Last year, the Shakespeare Festival/LA auctioned on EBay a speaking role in "The Comedy of Errors" alongside Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson. The Royal Shakespeare Company in London has been inviting schools and amateur dramatic groups to perform on their main stage.

Corporate America understands how potent co-authoring of meaning can be for brand loyalty. New Era Capmakers, in targeting to what they consider "flagbearers" have committed to a \$10 Million advertising campaign with the following mottos:

- Fly Your Own Flay
- Start Your Own Movement
- Raise Your Own Game
- Blaze Your Own Trail
- Create Your Own World
- Sing Your Own Song
- Make Your Own Grand Entrance

Every discipline is entering into this coauthoring of meaning. This summer Walker Art Center staged "Open Field" on its grounds, where artists and the public created, performed, attended

demonstrations, or just watched everyone else. The Walker lent radios, blankets, playing cards, sketchpads, scissors and iPads to participants in this “cultural commons.”

The public has also been invited to vote on which works on paper, drawn from the Walker's collection, will be shown in its "50/50: Audience and Experts Curate the Paper Collection" exhibition this December.

Oakland Art Museum invites visitors to draw a portrait on a computerized pad and have it hang alongside other paintings from its collection. Denver Art Museum patrons printed out posters, created their own light shows, and recorded 60s memories as part of its “The Psychedelic Experience: Rock Posters” exhibition.

The Tate in London had choreographer Michael Clark in residence this summer. Last spring, Clark invited dancers, via the Tate website, to apply on a first-come-first-served basis. The only stipulation was they should not have been trained, and be available for rehearsals. Of the 86 dancers participating in his new project, 78 have had no previous training. The remaining eight were Clark's dance troupe.

These examples do not dumb down the artistry of these organizations, but expand cultural participation opportunities for audiences. The key to success is to find genuine ways for audiences to contribute and find meaning -- before, during, and after events. Try something small and see how it goes; find what's right you're your chorus. Arts consultant Holly Sidford reminds us, "Participation is the most important renewable resource."

But back to music...

YouTube

Michael Tilson Thomas brought the YouTube Symphony to perform at Carnegie Hall last year. Ninety musicians from 33 countries were selected from 3,000 videos submitted. Here's MTT's invitation to musicians:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=itTk01qJTus>

Composer/conductor Eric Whitacre's virtual online choir became a YouTube sensation, garnering him a contract with Naxos and the #1 selling classical CD in Britain.

Last year a friend emailed him a link to a video of a young woman singing the soprano part to "Sleep," an a cappella choral work he wrote in 2000. It occurred to him that if 100 people all recorded their respective parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass) he could line them all up and create a virtual choir.

So he dove into social marketing and asked people to buy the same recording of "Sleep" by the British choir Polyphony from iTunes. Singers from around the world posted their individual parts, simply singing along to the recorded piece. Scott Haines volunteered to cut it together.

Here's how it came out:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch#!v=Z1h3Tf26TcA&feature=related>

Whitacre then wanted to see if he could push the concept to the next level. He posted his conductor track with piano accompaniment for his work "Lux Aurumque." He offered the sheet music as a free download.

His goal was to see if people could not just sing their parts separately and cut them together, but if they could actually make

music. Let's watch some clips:

CTV News:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qF4LwbDYLgY&feature=player_embedded

He says his “ultimate goal is to write an original piece for the Virtual Choir and have it receive its world premiere in cyberspace, hundreds (maybe thousands) of people singing alone, together.”

Virtuosity is not dead, but celebrated in these online experiments.

Fund Development

Reframing our work to better enable cultural participation will also benefit fundraising. While at The San Francisco Foundation, I partnered with East Bay Community Foundation on an initiative to support the creation of new work by Bay Area artists and expand the pool of individual donors for artists, and small to mid-sized arts organizations.

A matching commissions program was set-up, allowing artists and organizations to apply for grants up to \$10,000 that had to be matched 1:1 from individual donors. The match also carried a 90-day period for organizations and four months for individual artists.

Central to the program was that the matching had to come from individuals. Why individuals? Giving USA's annual snapshot of philanthropy reminded us that 75% of contributions come from individuals annually. Another 6-7% comes from bequests (aka dead individuals).

This programs' success on a variety of levels exceeded our expectations. Over five years, the matching commissions program funded 116 new works projects involving 181 artists. Individual artists and small to mid-size arts organizations raised \$729,254 from more than 3,130 individual donors who gave between \$2 to \$10,000 to match \$658,750 awarded by East Bay Community Foundation and The San Francisco Foundation.

This success was not easily won by all grantees. We helped organizations and individual artists understand they could do this. This was especially important assistance to individual artists and artist lead performance companies without development staff. We coached them to understand their "fans" would be willing to support their work beyond attending performances or buying DVD's and CD's if they were ready to ask.

We brought in fund development experts who stressed organizations need to start where they were, and build from their students, audiences as well as their communities whether their communities were defined by geography, discipline, race or ethnicity.

Arts groups taught others, as the initiative progressed. We reiterated that groups had to operationalize the 'church ask.' While arts only get 4-5% of annual philanthropy, religion gets 35%. No believer minds, or even thinks twice about giving/tithing to their synagogue, temple, mosque, or church. Arts offer similar profound and transformational experiences to those who engage in the arts at almost any level, so we bet this was possible, even in small grassroots and cultural specific communities.

In pollster John Zogby's recent book, "The Way We'll Be" he finds Baby Boomers and what he calls the First Global Generation of 18 to 29 year olds looking for meaningful experiences. The arts community is perfectly situated to appeal to these roving bands of "secular spiritualists."

Psychographics

The Matching Commissions initiative primarily worked with small- and mid-sized grassroots arts groups, working in culturally specific forms in communities of color. The false perception within many of the grantees was that these audiences were too poor to be donors. This was not true.

Since middle and lower class donors are not often profiled, we wanted to explore the underlying values associated with the giving to these artistic projects in order to understand what motivates arts and culture donors to give and what key connection points inspire giving.

The research report, *It's Not About You...It's About Them, A Research Report: What Motivates Bay Area Donors to Give to the Arts and Artists* (<http://www.eastbaycf.org/grantmaking/279-its-not-about-youits-about-them>) was conducted by Alan Brown and Rebecca Ratzkin of WolfBrown with Marcy Cady and Holly Sidford from Helicon Collaborative. I have a few copies for those of you that are interested.

The study is based on a survey of 1,900 donors involved with the Matching Commissions program, and, as a control group, 8,500 donors to 17 mid- and large-sized cultural organizations in Bay Area. Study results also incorporated information from extensive interviews conducted with more than 70 artists and donors involved in the matching program. This was a very key component as interviewers listened to donors first and foremost, something we do not often do in the fundraising environment.

Results showed donors are motivated by their connection to work, as well as their basic values. Here is the key: understanding those bridging points and values, and developing the ability to tell the story from a value-based perspective, can help build stronger relationships with donors. The in-depth interviews suggested donors become engaged via four connections:

- A personal relationship with the artist or someone in the arts,
- A passion for the art form or the art medium,
- An emotional or intellectual interest in the subject matter or issue, and
- An involvement with the culture or community involved in the project.

Your choruses share all of these connection points!

Five values motivated Bay Area arts donors:

- Localism – a concern for one’s community and for artists living in the community;
- Progressivism – an interest in being “on the leading edge of art and ideas;”
- Humanism – a concern for social justice and equal opportunity;
- Distinction – an interest in “great works that have stood the test of time” and artists with national or international reputations; and
- Bonding – an interest in civic affairs and community improvement; appetite for expanding social networks and making new friends.

Since the research also queried donors from 17 mid- and large-sized Bay Area arts organizations, values of donors to the Matching Commissions were more likely to be:

- Artists themselves (professional or amateur);
- Young adults or mid-life (18-54), without children, and of diverse cultural backgrounds;
- Interested in social justice and environmentalism;
- Giving less than \$5,000 annually to all charitable causes; and
- Interested in supporting small projects rather than sustaining institutions.

This last point about their small gift making a difference is something that resonated throughout all the interviews. Small gifts making a critical difference with groups seemed more motivating to these donors than giving to large organizations.

The study confirmed our hypothesis that donors to the small and mid-sized arts groups differed significantly from the high net-worth donors often profiled. (See The Center of Philanthropy's *2008 Study of High Net Worth Philanthropy* for comparative data). Indeed for our donors, "operationalizing the church ask" proved effective, even for the smaller donors.

Another residual impact of the Matching Commissions program was bringing donors into the creative process from the beginning. They enjoyed seeing new works being developed from concept to realization. Los Cenzontles invited people into the process of making their music and listed all donors on their CD. AXIS Dance Company invited donors to preview nights, and called all donors onstage to recognize and thank them.

Also key was for artistic directors to become more involved in fundraising. Choreographer Robert Moses got on the phone and made personal appeals to everyone who had ever given his dance company money. Chorus directors need to understand this and participate. A personal ask is always golden from an artist.

Here is what is clear to me: don't forget the Middle Class. Start with the people you know: audiences, volunteers, donors, and neighbors -- and ask for modest gifts, often. The Obama campaign proved the power of this kind of fundraising.

Conclusion

My initial starting point in preparing my remarks was going back and watching past episodes of GLEE. I am such a fan. We have

come a long way, that this highly rated and award-winning show has made choruses hip and sexy for kids, spawning Glee camps all over this country, including at the Flynn Center for the Performing Arts. We are already over-subscribed for our Show Choir.

One aspect of GLEE that I love is every stereotype is celebrated in here: the fey sissy boy, the entitled Jewish princess, the big black girl, crippled boy, dumb jocks, and vapid cheerleaders. The disenfranchised outsiders are now in! The butch dyke cheerleading coach's war with the sensitive straight choral director is priceless, beyond camp!

Spending time listening to past episodes and reading about the extraordinary success of this unorthodox series, I saw how the producers allowed fans to find their own stories and share them online. Every week, Gleeks upload their own versions of themselves lip-syncing and dancing to whatever songs were featured in that week's episode.

Instead of shutting these down as copyright infringement, the producers are genius in encouraging these co-authoring of meaning through YouTube technology. Ultimately of course, emboldened fans become ever more loyal to the juggernaut that is Glee: television, CDs, summer tours, and even a possible Broadway show.

Gleeks' Say A Little Prayer parody:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch#!v=gJzDww8gQUY&playnext=1&videos=a-n2jPwyWzE&feature=feedrec>

Or how this for a publicity stunt with a flash mob in Seattle:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch#!v=g5PyIVVKoWU&feature=related>

GLEE understands active fans become ever more loyal. Drag queens and kings have long celebrated life-affirming allegiances to divas and other iconic figures, revealing more about them and us, than about those they emulate. I know, I am a total Cher queen, and can't wait for Thanksgiving when her next film, *Burlesque*, is released.

Before we begin our discussions, I thought I would end with a short song from GLEE:

Imagine:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JN191QXws7o&NR=1>

I look forward to our panel discussion and then answering any questions. Thank you for your attention.

John R. Killacky is the executive director of Flynn Center for the Performing Arts in Burlington, VT. These remarks were presented at the "Thinking Big: Innovative Directions for Changing Times" GALA Choruses Annual Leadership Conference on September 3, 2010 in Dallas, TX.