

# Teaching Artists as Arts Emergency Surgeons for Community Healing and Empowerment

ITAC THINK TANK: September 2021

*Hosted by Peter Atsu Adalety - Ghana*

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This is the transcript of one of ITAC Collaborative's monthly Think Tank sessions. Each session focuses on a new theme and is hosted by someone from a different country.

While referencing his own stories and experiences, Peter invited participants to share the challenges facing their own local communities. Collectively, they discussed the role arts can have in addressing community challenges and how said communities can be effectively engaged at local levels.

To keep the conversation in motion, a formed working group will aim to include people from a wide variety of local communities (from all over the world), that are facing their own unique challenges. What do we have in common? What is context specific? What can we learn from each other to help us address these issues?

This project will challenge working group members to identify other Teaching Artists within their local communities and begin to map ways in which they might effectively engage community members in creative change-making. The group will work together to support, and provide insights into, the ways in which the arts could be utilized to address their identified challenges. Participants will be encouraged to pilot community engagement methods, report back, and identify the approaches which have worked best in their own contexts.

The intended outcome of this project is the creation of small, local, community-engaged TA cohorts. The process by which these are built will be documented and made available online as a 'how to' guide for other TAs seeking to build and mobilize local community collectives.

Instances in which the text is in ellipses in parentheses (...) indicate when the sound was indecipherable for transcription.

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### **Peter Atsu Adalety**

So coming here is another opportunity for us to reconnect and build. And I am really ready to work with as many people as I can. And here in Ghana, what I've been doing over 20 years now has been in the communities, I mean, changing lives. I mean, as a teaching artists moving to as many schools, churches, I mean fan spaces as possible as I can to make an impact in the lives of children, the youth, and even artists, both professionals and amateurs. And I strongly believe that what we do it just, if we're to what the emergencies to two, in the health centers, because this to make sure that we give life, meaning, and also to connect people. And I believe that whoever we made today who is making a huge impact in the community, people who once upon a time, have teaching artists in their lives, who invested quality time and resources in making sure that the group that is why I believe that whatever we are here to do today, we exist to make sure that we invest as much as we can selflessly, so that whatever how huge our profile is, on the net, be it our resume online, we make sure that the grassroot which is the communities, we are really making an impact. Because until we go back to the roots to really make an impact, we can see people flourish. And we can see people making a huge impact in their lives. Before I came into contact with ITAC, which was the first International, which was the fourth international teaching artist conference in New York, I was doing what I love doing selflessly, I mean, I was really cold. Sometimes, because the field wasn't a field that was accepted or respected or even recognized. And for me, I keep telling this and I'm happy to share this with Madeline and muddy belief in the same that Madeline told me that she loves what she's doing over the years. And she can do it for not enter the same thing I stood for and that I believe most of you here are all of you are doing. You can we keep doing what we love. And we love what we do, if any comes anything comes in that is just for us. So I welcome all of you here. The idea here is to make sure that we put ourselves together and find reach out to our communities. What are the challenges in our communities? What are some of the things that we can do to impact this, and that is the very reason why we are here. So I'm going to box on quickly to Matlin, she's going to take us through some rooms, and then we can keep chatting. Thank you.

### **Madeleine McGirk**

Thank you, Peter. So as I mentioned, at the very beginning, Peter and I have been chatting, and we thought the best way for all of you to connect with each other, and to figure out what commonalities exist. And what differences exist, is to put you in rooms together to talk and to connect, and to build a sort of mini community of our own among the participants here. So Peters drawn up some questions that are now in the chat. And there are three questions we'd love you to talk about in your rooms, we're going to give you a good chunk of time, like 40 minutes or so, and then ask you to report back, there's going to be about five or six breakout rooms, about six people per room. And we would invite you to really just talk to each other, a little bit about your practice, what it is that you work to address and what some of those challenges are, where you are in the world. We could all be next door neighbors, I'm probably

we'd still be addressing different challenges in our work. But given the nature and seeing the chat here, we aren't all next door neighbors. So it would be great if you could generously offer what you will about your work, the challenges that you face in your community and how you can start to address that either in your wildest dreams or what you're already doing with art in your community. We had about seven breakout rooms. Can I invite us to just feed back into the session, some key takeaways, how you got on maybe starting with group one.

### **Woman 1**

We have a very lively discussion. Some of the challenges were made pretty universal. We had people from the United States Canada someplace So we were pretty spread out. Um, so one thing was schools not allowing outside staff to come in is a challenge. Um, and one of the recommendations for that was preparing kits or things that you we could physically take to deliver to the schools or to the students. So that they could still have the materials even though they may not have us there. And also a lot of discussion about empowering people to take control of their own creativity, creativity, or their creative learning. So providing them with resources, such as the kits, or other items that they can use to create arts and arts experience at home for them with, you know, a little bit of guidance. So like, people are finding joy and freedom in the anonymity of things. So if you are on a virtual platform, maybe people are more willing to do things they are because they can mute themselves, or they can take their video off that they wouldn't necessarily do such as singing in a group of people or doing some type of performance. Also, people mentioned that students that they work with virtually seem to have been more willing to help each other. Like if somebody is having a problem with the technology, people are quick to jump in and offer solutions. Oh, what did you try this? Try that. And it's creating a sense of community. So maybe like rethinking the ways that we think about community and realizing that it can still happen, even in under these circumstances. And that's just a small snippet, but I don't want to take up all the time. Oh, one thing I do have to say, though, and this is a really great suggestion, one of our members suggested that if we were all able to create a chart of the values of the arts arts learning, because that is one of the biggest challenges of people outside of the arts, not really knowing the value or accepting the value. So if we were to get with ITAC, to see if you all could try maybe have a Google Doc that we can all contribute to work with, these are the challenges and these is ways that the arts address these challenges.

### **Madeleine McGirk**

Amazing, thank you. And I know, pizza is going to pop back in in a second to take back over the session. But in the meantime, I would like to remind everyone because what you've just said a super onpoint for this pizza is going to lead a working group that stems from these discussions. And so you are all going to be invited to continue this in in a more structured way going forward. Because we can only scratch the surface in the time that we have. But something like that, he's going to invite you all to think about a project you might want to take together or something you might like to all dig into. And so something like that sounds like a very good suggestion. It's not for me to say whether it's the right one or wrong one. That's all on you, Peter, but thank you for that. And keep these things somewhere in your head because I'm sure you'll be invited to think about them more. And okay, so I can still see the breakout rooms in front of me so I can actually

tell who is in which room. So thank you. That's us carrying from room to now. Room One was Andrea, Jill, John pathed, PC and Shana. So I don't know someone from that group wants to unmute and share a little about your conversation.

### **Man 1**

Yeah, I'm not sure. Thank you, sir. Thank you said my name. Um, you know, a lot of things. One things we talked about was just the challenges of the inequities and education system. Um, we talked about some of the challenges that we're facing with some of have access to for some for some different communities being having access, you know, to the arts communities. And we also touched upon the power of being able these different art forms, being able to tell stories and the power of that, that it's used to connect into, and it can be a healing process too. Within this art form, in some of the echoing some of the thoughts earlier to was, was being able to articulate the nest necessity in the power of arts integration, you know, within the education system, to prevalence, of testing students has been so great that sometimes it was shadows being able to bring in to bring us in. Because a lot of times, they don't want to give up the instruction time. But being able to articulate how this how we're not taking away, but we're actually augmenting what they're teaching. And that this is that this is, you know, I call this we are essential workers, you know, within the education system. Because a lot of times our students are able to really access the education and really access the learning through the arts, because that's one thing that nobody talks about within our group as well. And just how we can, and also, we made different connections within the group, which was powerful to, I think, have the same points of commonality and how we can all support each other as teaching artists, so those are some of the main points that that were brought up in our group. So if anybody else from a group wants to share anything that I missed, please speak up.

### **Man 2**

Hello, everyone. And so I my my internet is a bit no stable. But what I also learned from my group in group one was that and we need to create space for most of the youth so that they can also be opened up to learn more, because when we are creative, at least, we know that there's a lot of space available for people to be able to have certain things to learn. Also, I believe that storytelling also brings about the connection. So when there's storytelling that comes in, there's a lot of connection that comes in, and we have some, some some of my movies, we all don't know how we're going to fund it, though. But you just tried our best not to take this thing out. But it's it's working, when we all come together in that in that way. So that is what I also learned from my group. Thank you.

### **Madeleine McGirk**

Thank you so much. I've put some of the groups in the chat so people can see. And hopefully feel free to nominate without me trying to pronounce everyone's name terribly. So. group three, can I invite someone from group three, the participants from that group are in the chat and I would love to hear about your discussions.

### **Woman 2**

Yeah, I can show up for group three. And I invite anyone else from group three that's Elana, Jeff Megumi I apologize if I mispronounce your name, a Myrna and Nancy, please feel free to hop in if I didn't get everything. But I just wanted to hit a couple points that we covered. I'm Becca, I live in Philadelphia, we were a group of all users, most of us from from Atlanta, which was really cool to see. I think that was, you know, super random connection that that happened. But a couple points that we hit on our Jeff pose this concern around teaching artists sort of parachuting in, meaning that we we are often there temporarily as guests. And so how do we maneuver around this idea, which can often turn from help to harm around parachuting in to a community being there very temporarily, and then leaving and perhaps not leaving our communities with anything that feels sustainable, or anything that feels like they can really hold on to it build off of it, without our presence, which can often like I said, turn into initially somebody that that we may view as helpful but the community itself maybe was harmed. In that same vein of what can we do as artists and teaching artists to help sort of targets or our specify what concerns that our communities may have? There are many and I'll speak specifically around the work I do as a teaching artists is primarily school based and I help to form complaint choirs. And so young people have a lot of things that they see a lot of things that are confusing and a lot of things to complain about. So what is my duty? and responsibility as the teaching artist to help guide my young people to focus on a specific issue to target and again, not leave the door so wide open as to create harm and not held. Another thing that we spoke about was the idea of working outside the box, you know, we are creatives and as creatives you like to like break that box open, or as Myrna said so beautifully, like sometimes she doesn't even see the box, a box does not exist. Um, so what is our responsibility there for like busting the box open or just ignoring the box altogether, and work as a creative person? And then, lastly, Jeff asked us finally, like, how do we feel around targeting this really major global concern? That is climate change and global warming? Like what is our responsibility there for? Targeting that as a major concern with the communities that we work with, while still listening to their, you know, very pressing concerns? What is it that we need to do to bring in bring us back to that major issue around environmental justice, which affects every corner of our community?

### **Madeleine McGirk**

Thank you so much part of me, it's like, Man, I wish we could have recorded the breakout rooms, but I know it's never the same if you know, it's being recorded. Thank you so much group for in just someone from group for wanna unmute and introduce your discussion? Okay, no problem, I'm not going to move on. But if there's any feedback that you'd rather put in the chat, then unmute and say out loud, and we save the chat. And we will mix all of that into one good goodie bag together. So feel free to feedback that way, if that's more comfortable, and group save, can I invite someone some group five to unmute and share a little about your chat,

### **Woman 3**

I can speak a little bit for group five. My name is my addre. I'm calling them from Beirut, Lebanon. I go by she her hers. And we spoke about a lot of things. So I came in a little late. So please summon from good five, jump in and say anything I may have missed. But we spoke a lot about. So we had quite a few countries in the space, which were really cool. Philippines, Japan, Glasgow and Beirut, I hope I'm not missing anything. And so the conversations, if they

were really cool, because we spoke a lot about the challenges I guess a lot of us are facing as like as a country really, and how that impact then whatever is being whatever is kind of being taught, or we want to talk about as teaching artists or artists in this space with different communities. And so there was a lot of conversation around the government's role or conversation around the lack of resources and just each country circumstances. So I know, I think it was the Philippines and Lebanon, we're going through an economic crisis, how is that impacting unemployment with artists, or, you know, going through high rates of poverty in certain aspects. So, you know, mental health or climate change is often dismissed as not a priority when actually environmental racism is just the the movement in itself is radical when it comes to poverty, really, and, you know, conversations around around that are, you know, how to how to facilitate conversations with Elissa. You know, speaking from Lebanon, we get a lot of funds from international NGOs. You know, when it comes to, you know, during now that we had the economic crisis, we went through a revolution, we had the Beirut blast, you know, or, you know, all those things. And so how is the money coming in from INGOs being spent in the right way, with communities where it's not poverty porn, it's not oppression Olympics, it's not, you know, it's actually assisting the community at hand in a way that's useful and not just turning us into a show really, for other communities. And, and this was something we also saw is common in the US, right, like with brown and black kids in schools. And those so I think, I think the conversation really jumped was was all about just how to, yeah, what's the role of the art and how can we kind of talk about the role of the arts and In a way, that's not just theater, like the tools of theater, like facilitating conversation, the techniques of theater, how its branded, in a way, how it's kind of excluded from the conversation of psychosocial support, or education or gender, and education specialties. So how to kind of allow for them to be included in the conversation without it being just theater? You don't scare people off with that. I hope I didn't miss anything. Yeah.

#### **Madeleine McGirk**

That's amazing. Thank you. If you missed anything, I don't know how you fit any more into that discussion. It wasn't really. Thank you. Okay, I see from the chat that Jan is ready to report for group for John French.

#### **Woman 4**

Oh, yeah. Okay. My group, I'm not known for my word. But I drew this picture. Because I thought it sort of summarized what we kind of talked about, which was doing the local projects maybe all at the same time and sharing what we're doing at the same time. And that might be a way, even projects that aren't related. I mean, you could, like apply this to other projects. But if you run them parallel, and we, like, try to connect classrooms or even, you know, groups by zoo, we can kind of get more, more energy around that topic, or whatever we're going to be working on. So our group, I guess, our challenges challenge that we thought of was equitable distribution of resources is a problem in every place that we've been in. So Peter said he would like to travel to see all of us and I thought, in your mind, or actual physical, I mean, that is kind of what we're doing just to learn about each other. So yeah, throw. So if you have anybody, if anybody from group four has anything else to say that was, so these are a little local projects that we're all doing at the same time. So all the energy that we generate, we can multiply.

**Peter Atsu Adaletey**

Yeah. Honestly, I'm so grateful about about this vague group. And she says she's an introvert, but I told her, she's not an introvert because she's very loud with a passion. It's a really fun group. I mean, I really love everything about the group. And so traveling is gonna be virtual and physical. I mean, blasting with a lot of energy in everywhere, and, and to all of you especially madly, the draft, just so is something scared at the moment when we have the discussion. And that blew our mind. I mean, it tells you what can happen happen if we unite our passion, and then zoom into the communities as the grassroots to bring change back and spring up? And does it?

**Madeleine McGirk**

Thank you so much. I love when there's an artistic response, that it's always such a nice surprise, especially in such small time. To keep it moving group six, does anyone want to report in and tell us about the conversation you had? Again, the grips are in the chat.

**Man 3**

We discussed it before breaking out. So I will try my best to encompass the conversation we have. We had a lovely group of people who were all very polite. And it featured people from Brazil, the United States and an American living in China. And just going through the conversation of the challenges that we're each facing, depending on where we are in the United States, or what country and take the majority of the time, and the pandemic has clearly affected a majority of the people and the work we're doing. China is in a completely different situation because they have very aggressively handled the situation. And people largely have been living normally. And so it highlighted that set of challenges that that we as teaching artists faced before the pandemic of advocating for the importance of the arts as for our communities for people as citizens and the pandemic challenges. We're gaining access to those communities in Brazil, being able to do the work inside the United States and facing new sets of challenges based off political climate and policy changes. And it really highlighted that underlying cultural importance that we place on the arts and Getting to know the communities that we're actually serving, and making sure that we're in touch with what's relevant to the people we serve, whether it's people and the elderly, or young children or elderly with dementia, or people in favelas, or people in society where it's very real results oriented about testing. And it comes down to that question that I think one of the other groups was talking about, I can't remember who was talking about just being able to effectively advocate for what we do. And then we're here to have that conversation to share ideas, and how do we facilitate those conversations effectively inside of our, the work that we do on the ground and in our communities, to get their contribution. So we're not telling them what the problems we'd like them to address are, but to actually get it from that grassroots movement, and then connecting it to the broader sense, like idea that Jan has, its, it was a lovely visual presence. Patient, I love the teaching artist work that's happening there. And it reminds me of the Eric booth coming up. When we have differences, and we're starting at two points, we start drawing our circles bigger, until there's the overlap. And then that's where the energy and that's the sweet spot where even projects that are working in seemingly unrelated fields are working, there is that synergy, and there's a place

where it overlaps. And even what would it look like to be taking projects that we're working on? And the different mean, the different problems we're trying to address to learn from challenges that are happening in other places? And what does that actually look like? And how are we actually facilitating those complications and conversations, we had some really wonderful anecdotes of how that works in elderly homes with dementia, using music and dance to get people to open up and start having those conversations and to be able to use that as the vehicle for them to actually remember things. And children, people who are doing teaching artists work on the beaches, where they saw a shark attack a whale, I think is what happened and discussing how climate change is affecting the oceans. And so drying these micro events, to the macro perception of what we're talking about on a global scale. And as an international group of teaching artists. Think I'm capturing most of it, but I'm sure I missed a lot. There was a lot of excellent conversation.

### **Madeleine McGirk**

Wow, thank you so much. That's a really powerful sentiment to end that feedback on. That's amazing. Thank you. We have one more group to hear from and about two minutes to hear that feedback before Peter jumps back in to tell us what's going to happen next. So can I invite group seven to be back,

### **Woman 5**

I'll speak for groups seven, I will try to be quick and succinct and hit all the points. And also, of course, my brain is reeling from the six previous groups. So our group lives in the United States. And so our conversation was a little US centric just to acknowledge that this is a global platform, but we are from New York City in North Carolina, Atlanta, and then the United Kingdom via Seattle, Washington. And as artists and teaching artists, our practice encompasses a lot of adult and young people focused teaching artistry, including textile artistry, storytelling, performance dance, and working with refugees, military and educational says students in an educational setting. So I thought that was really exhilarating, to have so many different forms, and conduits and routes for teaching artistry. We talked a lot about proximity and equity within COVID situations, like technological equity, actually having supplies but also the idea of life equity, you know, poverty and how that has affected the people that we work with in much different ways. And then the proximity of coming out of remote situations and that sense of being kind of blinded by the sun, and the exhaustion of really physical proximity and stamina back with one another again, and back in classes again, and how that affects our stakeholders and the people that we're working with. Young and old. We really then talked about wellness, programming and resilience, and coping mechanisms and coping skills through artistic practice with a lot of the people that we work with, and really peacemaking and peacebuilding, which then can extend to larger communities and really thinking about who our communities are outside the box and looking at artistic practice as a means for being problem solvers and solving unforeseen issues that come up because as artists, we're all comfortable to some extent to the unknown, right. That's what we have to be for our livelihoods and for creative practice. And really looking at how the situations or constraints that we've been managing, have forced us to look for possibility outside of the box. That's a very succinct way to say what we talked about for a very long time, we ended really talking about embodied practice, and really sort of how to guide people into self

advocacy. Through practice, rather than cognitive thinking about practice. So doing more or jumping in getting our hands dirty, rather than planning and, you know, creating ideal so much, which I think academically I personally can get trapped into. So that was a good reminder of how to jump back end, and really work with people and practice make make the you make the art by making the art. Anybody else want to add on, I had a great group. So that was very, very quick. But I know time is of the essence.

**Madeleine McGirk**

Amazing, thank you so much. These last few really entered on punchy exit lanes, right? That's amazing. And Okay, with that, I'm gonna stop talking. And let Peter, take us through the rest of the session. Thank you so much, everyone, for feeding back and for being so generous with your chats.

**Peter Atsu Adalety**

Good. Thank you so much muddling money. Are we have time to go back to some rooms? Or does it?

**Madeleine McGirk**

We have five more minutes.

**Peter Atsu Adalety**

Okay, okay. Let me just wrap up. Again, I want this opportunity to thank all of you, I see a lot of ITAC, five faces. And I don't, I can't stop saying this is brings a lot of warning to me. I want to confidently and boldly state here strongly that the worth of a teaching artists is not in his educates the worth of a teaching artist. I mean, your worth is not in your certificates, it's not in your degree, your professorship is not in all your can be stressed, on the ground, on what you do on the ground. So I'm going to surely send you the video for you to watch. I have been with some of these, I've met some of them 20 years. But what they told me, it just inspired me again, what I want us to do, we are meeting here as a collective, and to break out into various communities. The idea is to for all of us to move back into our communities, not to be idle, but to allow the community to feel who we are, how worthy we are. And that we can invest our energies there and make change and heal the minds of people, our communities, sorry to say our sake, there's a lot happening in the communities. And we teach artists can sit and write stuff online, we need to put things in the communities, we need to bring change. And that is why I have all of you here that let us come together, create ideas, borrow ideas, put them together, launch them into various communities, co connect, co create, and then bring in something great. And I'm here to see some of the new working with me with the working group. And Madeline's going to share more of that. Thank you so much for having me.

**Madeleine McGirk**

Thank you, I've shared a link in the chat to do exactly what Peter's just described. I'm so sorry. We didn't get to hear your video pizza and hear all about the amazing work you do. But we will absolutely share that with everyone after this. And we will also issue the link because I know some people have left. But not hype you up too much Peter and make you uncomfortable. But if

we had been able to see the video and share some of those things, I think we would have seen the power that Peters work emanates all over Ghana and beyond and certainly through our attack community. And I think I would really encourage all of you to join him so we can deep dive some of what we may be missed at the start of the session today about the role we can all have in our communities and what we may do together that connects locally but shares globally. And that's really what we're trying to do here today. So thank you very much. We have two minutes left if anyone has any burning things they want to share. But otherwise, I think we'll end the call here and follow up with links and all the sign up to stay engaged