

Arts Online: The New Normal for Students, Campers and Teaching Artists

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Camp BroaderWay's 10 year anniversary was meant to be celebrated in the warm, rural outdoors of the Berkshires. Like previous camp seasons, the smell of campfire, the sound of "Future Leaders" (campers are called "Future Leaders") singing the signature A BroaderWay theme song, and the August breeze serve as a stark contrast to the muggy, dog days of a city summer.

"When I went to camp it felt like I had no problems," said Vanessa Pavia-Fuentes, recent graduate of A BroaderWay and current intern, "the only thing I had to stress about was how cold the floor was going to be. I feel fortunate to have been able to grow up literally and metaphorically with the camp."

COVID-19 put a stop to that summer daydream for urban campers. Hosting camp in-person no longer became an option as COVID-19 cases continued to rise in the United States. In-person gatherings were advised against by government officials, forcing summer camps in New York City to cancel their summer season or find a safer alternative. A BroaderWay's 2020 camp experience was forced to trade their 10-day retreat in Massachusetts for a 10 day-long online camp session.

"I wish camp was a required part of every child's education," said Susie Lupert, executive director of the American Camp Association of New York/New Jersey, "It creates an essential environment that a lot of urban kids can't get in New York City schools."

The A BroaderWay day starts at 10 a.m. Future Leaders (the name A BroaderWay uses for campers), counselors, and the creative team all log on to Zoom and start their "Morning Meeting," a tradition created by the camp in which everyone comes together to discuss the schedule for the day. In the past, Morning Meetings would have 80-plus camp attendees sit in a large circle and interact with one another. Now, 70-plus small, pixelated faces fit together in small squares in the Gallery View feature on Zoom. Today's meeting starts with Torya Beard, executive director of A BroaderWay, sharing her screen to show a music video 'Somos Sur,' a Spanish-Indigenous song representing the unity of different cultures in Latin America. After the music video is finished a discussion led by Beard and other creative team members starts to engage the Zoom audience with what they saw. The discussion shifts from the meaning of the song to the meaning of songs in today's music, specifically involving female artists and

liberation through popular songs. “You guys are getting some serious artistic education at this camp,” said Sophia Stevens, the songwriting/music teacher, to her young students listening, “and you can’t take that for granted.” After the discussion girls by age group break off into their classes for the day, ranging from; film to songwriting, theatre, spoken word and dance. They take a lunch break for an hour, meet back together and end their Zoom session for the day until 10 a.m tomorrow.

“The experience went better than expected,” said Beard, “ We were already preparing to move the curriculum planned to an online format in March. The ABW Staff had also become more familiar with Zoom as that’s how everything is now,” Beard said laughing.

There is no clear answer for camp directors whether they will be able to safely resume camp this summer. Summer programs in New York City don’t have a definite answer of what the future year may look like, and neither do the arts in public education. According to the New York City Public Education budget, the arts funding is expected to have \$15 million cut out of the \$21.5 million budget for 2021. Summer programs in New York City are being cut from \$20 million to \$15 million as well for the 2021 year..

“The arts give students different tools and a way to express themselves and their emotions,” stated Kimberly Olsen, executive director of the New York City Arts In Education Roundtable. “We miss out on providing our students by not investing in the arts right now, we are missing out on giving our students authentic ways for them to connect with each other.”

Despite future uncertainties of how the arts will be provided to students, specifically to New York City kids, nonprofits and theater companies are creating innovative ways to bring the arts online and continue to fight for the importance of arts education. The NYC Roundtable launched the “Arts are Essential” campaign to create awareness for the importance of arts in student’s lives involving teaching artists and Broadway actors such as the Hamilton Cast.

“We continued to engage in community letter writing campaigns to our city council representative’s and to our mayor and Chancellor,” said Olsen, “We sent an open letter that was endorsed by almost 130 organizations throughout the city calling to make the arts an essential part of every student’s education.”

Advocacy for the arts is growing stronger in the online world and bringing those opportunities to kids seem more important than before. Lack of funding towards NYC's arts budget poses a greater challenge for schools and cultural organizations to support arts education. The debate of funding for the arts is a familiar topic in NYC education that spans across the years and shows itself to be an ongoing concern in the pandemic.

In 2014 Mayor Bill de Blasio, Comptroller Scott M. Stringer and School Chancellor Carmen Farina announced its plan to add \$23 million of additional funding to the City's arts education budget and to strengthen support for cultural programs across the city. The boost in the budget helped 87% of schools partner with at least one arts provider from the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school year, according to New York City's 2018-2019 Annual Arts in School's Report. For the school year of 2016-2017, the percentage decreased to 82% as fewer students were becoming involved with the art classes. The percentage picked up for the school year of 2017-18 but continued to decrease, leading the 2019-2020 school semester to mirror 2016-17's percentage of 82%, according to the 2019-2020 Annual Arts in School's report.

Nearly 56% of art providers for the school year reported that a reduced school budget was part of the reason for a decline in partnerships with cultural organizations in 2019-2020, based on a study conducted by the Cultural Arts Organizations Budget.

Slashed budget cuts to arts education boosted the spread of Arts Advocacy and caused the New York Department of Cultural Affairs to establish "Create NYC: A Cultural Plan for New Yorkers" in July 2017. Create NYC released "New York City's first-ever comprehensive cultural plan" in order to ensure cultural programs will be available to the public, including in public education.

In the 2019 Cultural Action Plan, their "Objective Five" section includes strategies and plans to further expand art education by including more cultural organizations, and a strategy of working with the Department of Education to ensure arts education is inclusive to all students, including those with disabilities and from highly diverse communities.

That was back in 2019, when in-person classes and social gatherings were the norm. But now it's 2021, and we're in a pandemic.

For the 2020-21 school semester, NYC students' are either having a hybrid schedule where select days would be in person and online, or it's completely online learning.

“From the teaching perspective, I heard many [teachers] refer to it as their first year teaching,” said Olsen.

School online was new for teachers and students. But what happens when a student's internet connection is weak, or they have no access to the internet at all?

According to a survey done by the Citizens' Committee for Children of New York, “more than 150,000 NYC children live in households without internet,” in 2019. Boroughs such as the Bronx, Brooklyn and Staten Island recorded more than 15% of children lacked internet access. Data has not yet been released on the statistics for 2020, but with online learning being the new normal for NYC children, it brings to question how schools and arts programs are supporting all of their students.

Groove with Me, an all-girls dance and performing arts-based program in Spanish Harlem, has been navigating how to continue with classes and support their students. Opened in 2001, the program serves over 200 girls with various forms of dance and is celebrating it's 20th anniversary this year. The program created an online portal where students can access dance classes, post on their community board and other online interactions. Students who were struggling to gain access to classes were provided with support.

“We did a lot of donor outreach and were able to give out laptops and we were able to create a laptop borrowing system, which was very helpful for families,” said Angie Agudo, program director of Groove with Me. The funding came from outside programs along with school programs that were already supplying technology for students.

Along with continuing their online curriculum, Groove with Me reopened their dance studios for in-person dance classes on February 22 with new guidelines: girls ages 7 and up can join class, eight students per studio instead of their previous attendance of 15, and of course masks on. They have also extended services beyond dance by hiring a mental health counselor and sending girls' families care packages of essentials they need like cold medicine and supplies for hygiene.

It's clear Agudo and her other staff members have a deep concern for her girls. While the interview was conducted the phone for Groove with Me rang and Agudo paused the interview to answer. It was one of her student's who called to let Agudo know she couldn't make it to class. Agudo's voice softened as she gently asked how the girl is doing, if everything is ok, and she'll see the young girl soon when she returns to class. Agudo ended the phone call and then returned back to the Zoom interview.

Seeing Agudo's care and concern for the girl on the phone shows Agudo's dedication to her students and to keeping Groove with Me as a support system. Throughout the months of quarantine Agudo had been consistently sending surveys to the families of Groove with Me to better understand how the organization can provide programming and to check on everything at home.

"What we learned throughout this process was there wasn't enough technology around or there wasn't enough space in their household," said Agudo, "we called all our families who were registered in the past year and we asked them if they would like to register, and we got a large number. Around 115 parents said they were interested in returning." Groove with Me would originally have 200 students in the program.

Groove with Me knew the importance of continuing programming was not just for their students but for the student's families.

"They are more appreciative or really dedicated to what we offer and how much help it was for the families. We know our community in and out. We know who we serve, and we serve accordingly. We know that they are mostly single-home families and we know for a fact that in order to support the child we have to support the mom. We do this by giving them at least an hour in child care, that's honestly a gift," said Agudo.

A BroaderWay has also been keeping in touch with their "future leaders" with emails and Zoom scheduled workshops where, similar to a camp day, arts activities are conducted and everyone gets a chance to catch up with one another. They even encourage family members to join.

“The parents don’t actually get to see how we conduct our workshops and how the program actually works (when we are in person),” said Beard.

Online camp was new for A BroaderWay but with the use of Zoom, Google Classroom, and other online avenues, A BroaderWay continued to push forward and celebrate their 10th anniversary the safest way they could.

“This is our new normal, everything went online and it’s a learning curve but A BroaderWay did a great job on weathering the obstacle,” said Fanta Ratty, former camper of A BroaderWay. Ratty is now an intern for A BroaderWay.

Having Zoom classes with everyone at home can still be disruptive. Returning to in-person classes and activities is a sign of hope for returning to life before COVID-19, but programs offering that personal experience are still limited. For students with no internet or access to technology, their access to art services are even more limited. However, arts programs across the city have been doing their best to make the arts accessible.

“There have been instances where cultural partners like “People’s Theater Project” and “Groundswell” located in New York City, or the Brooklyn Museum have created art kits and have personally been delivering them to students so that they have a way to engage with the arts at home. There’s also been instances of organizations that have worked in transitional housing offering devices and services directly to be able to support students and families,” said Olsen.

Creating care packages has become a productive way for arts programs to continue to provide arts for students. Leah Harris, program manager for The Theatre Leadership Project, has been leading her theater’s engagement with the Dallas community calling it “respecting the full spectrum of humanity” and understanding not everyone has accessibility to a computer/internet access.

“COVID has impacted the arts because we can’t be in a room together, but also I think it’s causing us to think about how accessible we can make our art form, and if it can’t happen on a screen or a Zoom screen how else can we bring art to the home,” said Harris.

Like many other teaching artists considering that same question, Harris had to think creatively and was committed to finding an accessible solution for students.

“One thing I was doing in my past job at the very beginning of the pandemic was partnering with local arts organizations to create art kits, different physical kits like coloring books, activity books, props and things like that. We made socially distanced drop-offs so parents, caregivers and teachers can pick up these art kits and actually have something physical in your home to do with your hands to keep you occupied.”

Aside from art kits and art dropoffs, online learning reigns supreme. Groove with Me has been using the organization’s websites and Instagram to host interactive livestreams to connect and host classes. Other organizations are also expanding their online services to teach different sectors of art, such as visual, vocal, and instrumental. ArtsConnection is a New York based organization created in 1979 and has worked with the public school system to provide in-class and out-of-class programming for students. Currently they offer a range of classes on their website and continue to work with other school programs and their own curriculum, which includes asynchronous class, a hybrid of recorded and live sessions, and asynchronous classes, sessions that are fully online with no meet-up time.

“They offer every single discipline,” said Olsen, who is currently a teaching artist with ArtsConnection, “they work with different types of populations to offer tailored and specialized programming to fit a school’s and students unique needs, they are one of the first organizations that got me involved in the arts and education world here in NYC and have definitely been instrumental in how I view my work now and how we prioritize teaching artists and make sure their voices are focused on any and all advocacy efforts.”

For the 2020-2021 school year, ArtsConnection made the decision to have teaching artists provide their classes online instead of traveling to various school sites. Kelly Donovan, director of in-school programming for ArtsConnection, explains how funding given to schools and the organization has affected programming.

“Previous years we worked with 110 schools and this year it’s 85 schools,” said Donovan. Donovan also estimated the number of students currently enrolled in programming is

10,000-12,000 students (pre-K through high school.) For the 2019-2020 year, there were 15,924 students enrolled.

“It was a health emergency first and then a funding emergency,” said Donovan, “All of our work that we’re paid for stopped so would there be future work? Would the money come in from schools? It was a lot of unknowns.”

ArtsConnections is funded through private, corporate, state, city and federal funders/grants through the Department of Education and Department of Youth and Cultural Development and other areas. Some of the grant money they had been given went specifically to support teaching artists who lost work during the pandemic. The organization was given a loan through the Payroll Protection Plan loan which was utilized for that reason.

“The money was used to hire back 70 artists and 30 staff to do an eight-week think tank where we brought everyone in and split up into different teams and brainstormed how we can do what we do in person, online,” said Donovan.

For teaching artists the shift to online learning has impacted how lesson plans would be shared to students and how to keep students engaged, especially after being on their devices all day for classwork.

Teaching artist Amanda Adams-Louis, also a member of the Queens Council for the Arts, focuses her curriculum on photography and observational drawing and had been preparing for the online shift since February of last year, but even extra preparation for online programming brought challenges.

“The program is based on observational drawing. It did sort of impact the way we teach it and the biggest impact is we can’t use live models. It’s very hard to draw from Zoom, it’s not the same as in-person,” said Adams-Louis, “The content we teach was the biggest shift. We had to teach students how to take pictures of their work so we could give them adequate feedback.”

Adams-Louis has also utilized her online programs to help support other teaching artists who lost their jobs.

“I specifically tried to invite and hire people to speak who I know have been laid off, furloughed, or fired, to engage my fellow educators and because they’re amazing and talented,” said Adams-Louis, “ I needed guest speakers so I’d rather work with people I know and who still want to be doing the work, who no fault of their own but from circumstances in life aren’t able to work to their full capacity.”

Adams-Louis is also a college counselor/advisor to her students (they also like to call her “art mom”). She believes her connection to her students is definitely stronger when it comes to in-person learning, but her students continue to be engaged with her programming and are receiving acceptance letters from colleges specializing in art.

“Almost all of the students in my program have gotten into the schools they wanted to, they have continued to develop their work and critique it,” said Adams-Louis. “ I’m amazed they keep going and showing up. This has been a crazy year particularly for young people.”

Arts programs are spreading the importance of art advocacy to fight for more funding but to also advocate the benefits from arts education. Lina Chambers, a teaching artist with an MFA in Drama and Theatre for Youth and Communities, advocates that introducing the arts to students builds social and coping skills.

“I had a student whose mom was dying of breast cancer and I was very close to the family. She was very transparent with what was going on, and they were talking to their child about it,” said Chambers. “ I would often see her playing with dress up clothes like wearing doctor’s outfits and almost practicing grieving or helping. She would tell things to the dolls and other kids that clearly she was working on in her own life. I was fascinated in the way imagination opens up not only our spaces of grief and understanding of the world but the potential for world building and making things better for ourselves.”

Arts education isn’t tested in the same way as other subjects like math or science. There is no standardized testing on the subject which creates challenges to show benefits it has on students.

“We put money behind what we believe is good for our young people and I’m not sure that there’s quite the connection made that art is actually the work and learning that young people need to do,” said Chambers.

“It’s vital to the human experience,” said Jacqueline Flores, executive office coordinator of Woolly Mammoth Theater located in Washington D.C, “I fully believe that making the arts available for more people benefits young minds and propelled them to continue to have an education because of the skills and community you build with theater.”

Arts education allows students to express themselves and process their thoughts and emotions through a creative, productive means. Program directors like Angie Agudo fear what could happen to students if they lose that support system by a loss of funding.

“When money is short and things are cut we lose a child to becoming an adult at a very young age, and they take on the burden of handling their own emotions, handling the emotions of their family and their innocence,” said Agudo.

Jennifer Hernandez, graduate of A BroaderWay and soon-to-be graduate of Marymount Manhattan College, knows firsthand how important art programs are to young girls.

“It’s very important for arts programs to be available to young girls especially in East Harlem,” said Hernandez, “in those areas, young girls and teens need something to distract themselves with and get involved in activities. Instead of getting involved with the wrong crowd and making bad decisions, these art programs help them to expand their creativity and their minds.”

Beard argues it’s even more important for the young women of color to be provided with art programs.

“We need to hear their voices and what they feel matters. The way our curriculum is set up is it goes from self, to group, to community, to society. And no matter how the young women want to go out and impact the world when they’re adults, actually getting experience practicing

speaking out, being fully expressive and advocating for themselves is very important. As they continue to mature they have the tools to do what they want,” said Beard.

McKayla Faye, former camper and current intern at A BroaderWay, knows firsthand the importance of arts programs for younger kids not just creatively but personally.

“I learned how to step out of my shell and interact more with people my age and understand what it’s like to look up to people but also have a mentor/friend relationship with them,” said Faye.

Faye was able to host an online arts class with the girls during the online camp experience last summer and saw how engaged they were with class.

“It was nice to see how the campers' creativity flows and the ideas they come up with and work together to create something they all like. Being able to share and feel confident with themselves and saying ‘this is what I made’ and seeing everyone support them was good,” said Faye.

As of now art classes and programming are expected to continue to be shared online or in a hybrid-learning curriculum. Adams-Louis would love to go back to teaching in-person, but that all depends how COVID-19 precautions and guidelines go.

“I’m happy to put on a mask and do it [teach] but it's also up to the communities to decide if they feel safe to attend the program. I think it really depends on the families and the students personal comfort level.”

It is clear that students involved with arts programs valued their time with the programs and the creative outlet they were given as opposed to all-day Zoom for regular schooling.

“There were a few cases in the spring where the residency ended but students kept going to the Zoom link after the class. We added extra sessions or a few times teachers and the kids would meet on their own in the summer and have an informal arts club because it was a place to socialize, make art together, talk about art. The interpersonal conversation and artmaking had been very important,” said Donovan.

A BroaderWay is expected to have their summer session online in the summer of 2021. But they're ready and so is everyone a part of the program. After an unpredictable year and the future of arts education continuing online, "Future Leaders" continue to show up to online sessions and workshops even when they go longer than three hours like the one held on March 20th. Similar to the summer sessions, the meeting started off with sharing of music videos "Future Leaders" wanted to share. The conversation then turned to more social issues such as the current patriarchy and the importance of womxn empowerment (some "Future Leaders" identify as they/them) The "Future Leaders" of tomorrow stayed through the entire session being active listeners and engaged in conversation. Why? Because of the support from their peers and mentors to continue to work on their love for the arts.

"Having someone that helps keep you on a path and encourages you to stay passionate about the things that you love makes a big difference in a kid's life. Especially at such a young age," said Faye.

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Interview Log

Torya Beard, Executive Director of A BroaderWay Foundation, September 10, 2020, Zoom Interview
Subject: Camp BroaderWay going online for their summer session
Contact: torya@abroaderway.org
718-930-6387

Susie Lupert, Executive Director of the American Camp Association in New York and New Jersey,
October 13, 2020, Phone call interview
Subject: Camps in New York City having funding cut
Contact: susie@acanyny.org
212-391-5208

Jacqueline Flores, Executive Office Coordinator of Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, September 17,
2020, Zoom interview
Subject: Theaters and art programs facing COVID-19 restrictions
Contact: jacqueline.flores@woollymammoth.net

Leah Harris, Program Manager for The Theatre Leadership Project, October 1, 2020, Zoom Interview
Subject: Art Programs dealing with COVID-19
Contact: leahharris528@gmail.com

Lina Chambers, Teaching Artist with a MFA in Drama and Theatre for Youth and Communities, October
15, 2020, Zoom Interview
Subject: Arts programming and the benefits towards children
Contact: lina.chambers@gmail.com

Fanta Ratty, former camper and ABW Intern, November 11, 2020, Email
Subject: Experience in camp
Contact: fantaball@gmail.com

Angie Agudo, Program Director of Groove with Me, March 1, 2021, Zoom interview
Subject: Groove with Me programming
Contact: angie@groovewithme.org

Kimberly Olsen, Executive Director of New York City Arts In Education Roundtable, Phone Call,
January 19, 2021
Subject: Arts Funding in New York City
Contact: kolsen@nycroundtable.org
516-205-7639

McKayla Faye, former camper and ABW intern, Zoom interview, March 15, 2021
Subject: Camp experience

Contact: mhave3525.student@hsfi.us

Kelly Donovan, Director of In-School Programs in ArtsConnection, Zoom Interview, April 12th, 2021

Subject: ArtsConnection programming

Contact: DonovanK@artsconnection.org

Amanda Adams-Louis, Teaching Artist, member of Queens Council of the Arts, Zoom interview, April 14, 2021

Subject: teaching arts education online

Contact: studio@lafotographeuse.com

Vanessa Pavia-Fuentes, camper and current ABW intern, Email, May 11, 2021

Subject: Camp experience

Contact: vanessa2k04@gmail.com

Jennifer Hernandez, former ABW graduate, Phone Interview, May 10, 2021

Subject: Camp experience

Contact: 718-594-3906