

# STILL LEARNING AFTER ALL THESE YEARS...

By Elise May

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## LET'S GET STARTED

...so begins my first day at Lincoln Center Education's Intermediate Teaching Artist Training during their Summer Forum 2015; two weeks of classes, keynotes, panels and performances. I love professional development! I thrive on being in a room filled with like-minded people who love the arts and sharing their experience. There is plenty of PD around for teachers; plenty around for artists; but for teaching artists – not so much. Let's not confuse this with Teaching Artist training, where an organization hones your skills to teach for them in their pedagogical style. I mean professional development for Teaching Artists by Master Teaching Artists to share techniques, best practices, ideas and rigorous experiential exploration all while having a lot of fun!

When Lincoln Center Education (LCE) spread the news that they were creating a course which was open to all teaching artists I thought I would apply. I had taken many PD courses where the pedagogy was specific to the organization which always left me feeling a bit disenfranchised; as if I was in a world of teaching artists who chose to speak different languages. It felt competitive. As these courses were open to teachers, I also felt that there was a sales pitch involved to get the organization's programs in schools. So I was slightly skeptical about LCE, wondering if all I was going to learn would be related to their model of aesthetic education focused on a work of art. While I thoroughly enjoy that practice, most of my teaching artistry has not been focused through that lens. I am an Independent Teaching Artist with a variety of programs in schools and communities which develop vocal empowerment through theatre arts. I love working with popu-

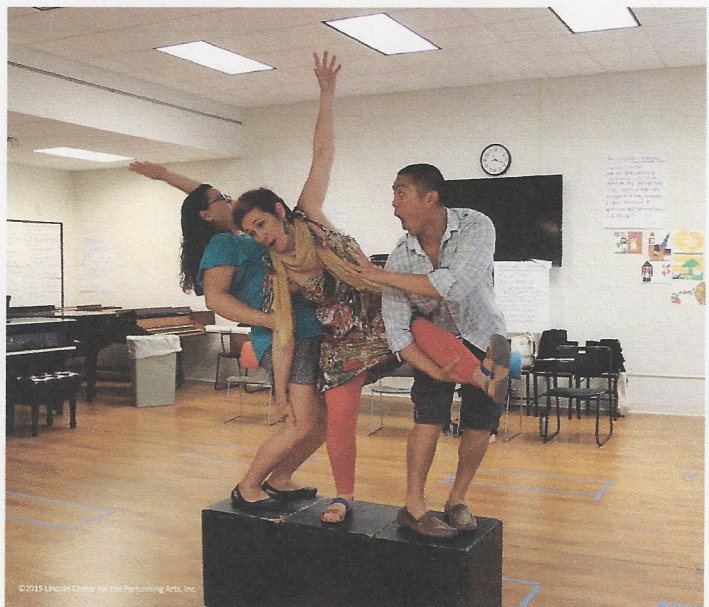


lations that may never make their way to a stage to perform but can use the skills that theatre and voice utilize to empower them no matter what direction their futures take. While my work does not center on an existing work of art, it very often creates a new one. I knew there were other TAs out there like me, developing relationships with districts, libraries and community centers while writing grants and creating programs to meet their needs. Yet almost every form of professional development I signed up for would generally lead me to a group of educators interested in the organization's programs and TAs who wanted to work for those organizations.

While applying to the LCE program, I learned that Russell Granet had joined Lincoln Center Education as their Executive Director. I had taken a Professional Development course from him several years ago when he was the Director of Professional Development at the Center for Arts Education. The PD was focused on Arts for the Special Needs population, which has direct applications to several of my programs. I enjoyed the class very much. Mr. Granet's knowledge, presentation and class structure gave me much to take away. Most importantly to me, the focus was arts education to service a population in need rather than any one ideology or pedagogy. This made me hopeful that LCE's new initiative would have the same open approach.

Then there was the fact that Eric Booth was advocating for the program. His article, "Something's Happening: Teaching Artistry Is Having a Growth Spurt," (Booth, E. (2015, July – September) Something's Happening: Teaching Artistry Is Having a Growth Spurt. Teaching Artist Journal, 13, 151-159) was recommended reading prior to the program. In it is the clear desire to define and unite a field that is almost as old as time in the hopes that it will only grow bigger and stronger (as opposed to going extinct!) Part of helping to make that growth happen was an inclusive approach which I had not seen linked with arts education before. This idea that there was more than one way to teach artistry was defined as "Purpose Threads." The defined purpose of each thread moving forward is done so from the aforementioned article with the author's permission.

Near the end of Eric's article, the "threads" were a new beginning for me. Although I knew I had never worked in the first thread (work of art), I was about to learn that I had worked in five of the others (art skills development, arts integration, community quality of life, social development and digital). This was extremely validating. For years, I didn't know whether or not I should use the term Teaching Artist because I did not work for a large organization. Now, the 'father of teaching artistry' himself, had clearly defined that what I do makes me a teaching artist. Now I owned it! Eric Booth has been a consultant in the creation of the LCE TA training program from its inception. In his own words, "I have had the good fortune of broad experience throughout the field, so I am able to help LCE open up to a fully inclusive training." Knowing that Eric was at the forefront of this new program, open to exploring teaching artistry of all ideologies, I felt as if I finally fit in. Application completed, processed and accepted

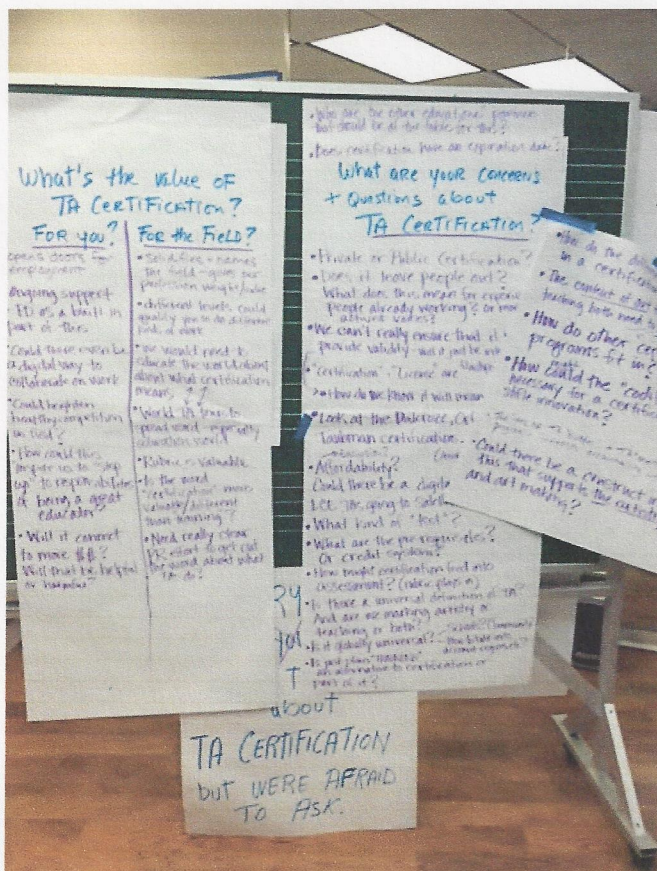




into a class of 19 TAs from seven countries. So...

Let's get started. Upon entering the room, the first thing I see is the gorgeous smile on the face of LaTonya Borsay. She was one of the facilitators of a course I took at the Theatrical Teaching Institute at the Roundabout Theatre Company. The focus there was a framework they developed using elements of a play to create cross-curricular lessons. Besides the comfort of a familiar face, I instantly felt that, unless LaTonya had switched allegiance, Lincoln Center Education was committed to opening its educational scope beyond its own experience. I learned that each day we will be focusing on a different "purpose thread" and that the facilitators were being challenged to teach a lesson in a thread other than the one they were used to. I liked that. It showed me this learning process was not expected to be one-way.

Besides these experiential workshops, each day would include a keynote speaker and/or panel sharing their work in the field. Many are connected in some historic or present way to Lincoln Center. Russell Granet, Matt Britton, Jed Bernstein, Ping Chong, Tim Webb, Gary Hynes and Eric Booth presented. Panel discussions included The Evolving Role of Cultural Organizations in Education, Growth Mindset: The Psychology of Success, Sustaining Philosophically-led Institutions, Culture at the Core, Redefining Advocacy in Arts Education and Teaching Artists in the 21st Century. Not all of these sessions were specifically geared towards Teaching Artists as other programs in Summer Forum were run simultaneously. All involved had impressive resumes and I looked forward to hearing what they had to say as well as seeing some of their professional work, which was also part of the program. It looked as if the next two weeks were going to be exhilarating and exhausting. I was looking forward to seeing if it was going to be the inclusive professional development experience I had been looking for. Let's get started!



LaTonya's lesson was focused on the Work of Art thread; its purpose to enhance the encounter with art works. Initially, we didn't know what the work of art was. The phrase, "Let's get started," was used repeatedly in the lesson which continued with choral clapping and exercises focused on cultural identity. It was a beautifully scaffolded lesson that led to us creating short scenarios of our own cultural identities. After that we went to see a play called Beyond Sacred: Stories of Muslim Identity by Ping Chong. The lights dimmed and the first words I heard were "Let's get started" and instantly the connection to LaTonya's workshop was clear. She opened up a way for us to engage in this new piece of theater which was presented by non-actors telling their stories of Muslim identity. I was impressed with LaTonya's ease as a facilitator in this work of art thread. The last time I had taken a class with her, the methodology was quite different.



I was hooked.

On our second day, we explored the Skills-Based thread; its purpose to deepen the development of art-making skills. I get this. I use this thread. However, the facilitator, Richard Mannoia, started with a rhythm and a phrase I couldn't get from my head to my hands and feet. I was feeling quite spastic and inept. Richard opened up other avenues to connect with the rhythm: auditory, visual, different notation, small groups with student leaders and individual tuition. I was getting better, but each time I achieved a level of comfort Richard added another level to differentiate and engage those well beyond my level of (in)competency. Fortunately, the level of frustration I felt was totally outweighed by the fun I had. While the methods used were very akin to mine in using multiple intelligences, trying a new skill put me back in a place where many of my students are when faced with a new challenge. I find that a valuable place to inhabit.

Our third day's focus was the Arts Integration thread; its purpose to catalyze the learning of non-arts subjects. A piece of cake! I do this all the time. Barbara Ellmann starts by asking us to share personal migration stories in small groups. She then handed each group a quote from Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series and asked us each to create a collage with construction paper. I thought I felt inept in Richard's workshop; now I felt entirely out of my depth. Creating visual art is definitely not my thing. Fortunately, I don't mind trying. Again, I remember the importance as a teaching artist to recognize how uncomfortable students can sometimes be with what is asked of them. As long as I give them a safe place and clear parameters to explore, wonderful things can happen.

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Scissors started snipping all around the room. The more I saw of others creative abilities, the less I wanted to start. Barbara recognized my reticence and was extremely supportive and nurturing. I took the plunge. I created something I would classify as "primitive". Barbara then told us the story of Jacob Lawrence's creation of 60 paintings for the great migration. That afternoon we met at MOMA. The exhibit was extremely disturbing on so many levels as history has a terrible way of repeating itself or just not changing. The impact of the exhibit, with the recent events in Charleston and subsequent church burnings was immense.

Wait! Isn't this the Work of Art thread? We are in a museum! Are we being manipulated into thinking that work of art is central to all threads? We have only worked with three threads so far and yet I'm already seeing how intertwined they can be.

On the fourth day, my suspicion continued as we explored the Community Quality of Life thread; its purpose to increase the livability of communities. We traveled up to The Point in the Bronx. It is an amazing community center dedicated to youth development and the cultural and economic revitalization of their community. We learned about what they do from the staff who were available to participate in our workshop. Then, the LCE facilitators led a workshop to help the staff





Photo credit: Lincoln Center Education

understand what we do. It was a workshop based on a musical work of art. It was a great workshop facilitated by Judith Hill Bose. The information we received from the staff was invaluable regarding what a community organization needs to do for its families to help all thrive. The day included a fabulous exchange of ideas and I think LCE walked away with a wonderful new community connection. As a teaching artist who works a lot in my community, I had a fun day, but was left wondering who benefitted more from the experience.

At the end of our first week, Eric Booth explored the Social/Personal thread in a workshop; its purpose to develop personal or social capacities. He stated that this is the fastest growing thread in the teaching artist industry, with arts programming for the aging leading the way. I have explored this through PD on creative aging offered by Lifetime Arts. At LCE, we discussed going off site on Monday to the Goddard Riverside Community Center and working with a group of 40 children who go to arts camp there. We worked as a group on a lesson plan which would incorporate the artistic interests of the children. It was decided we would use newspaper photographs and headlines to evoke points of view from the children which would be explored and presented through dance, music, fine art or theatre. I work in this thread a lot; not in the inner city but with a large immigrant population. In this environment, the necessity for comfort and a safe place to tell your story in is essential. You never know what experiences or memories will be evoked. While the need for process is essential, this group also has a need for product. This way they can see how the arts can be used by them to make sure their voices are heard. This can be a life-changing experience for all involved. No work of art used in our lesson here but some amazing new ones were created! Judith Hill Bose, one of the LCE facilitators, shared, "Personally, it stretched me as a very experienced TA. It changes the notion of what is the most important in the work itself." I



am feeling back on the all-inclusive track with LCE!

Another thread we explored was Digital; its purpose to activate personal artistry in digital media. I am the farthest from tech-savvy there is, so I thought I would not be able to connect with anything in this thread. With the help of Aaron Siegel, we discussed Blended Learning where all can progress at their own pace; the Flipped Classroom where you learn information online and have engaging group experiences; and one on one instruction through technology like Skype. About a year and a half ago, I was contacted by a teaching artist (although I doubt he would know this terminology) from Lagos, Nigeria. He is an actor/audio book narrator and literacy coach. He was interested in the possibility of teaching one of my programs. The schools he wanted to work in had no classroom technology so I couldn't Skype with students directly. I could, however, train him via Skype. For the past year, he has been teaching my program in one school and has two more signed on for next year. I have only been able to do this because of the Digital thread. Yet another thread I never knew I already used. I am creating quite a tapestry.

The final thread we explored was the Instrumental Goals thread; its purpose to achieve non-arts goals important to institutions. Presented by Alexa Miller of Arts Practica, this workshop showed how the teaching artist tools of aesthetic education, noticing deeply, inquiry and reflection, working with fine art enabled doctors to become better diagnosticians. The research backing this up was undisputable. The entrepreneurial aptitude of Ms. Miller was inspiring. Back in the 1980's, I worked with many financial institutions, teaching theatre voice techniques to traders primarily for phone solicitation; not nearly as inspiring but I do believe another thread I have sewn with.

The second week also brought a new form of learning; participant labs. Each TA was asked to teach a 30 minute session. We were asked to challenge ourselves and teach in a thread that we were not accustomed to. Interspersed throughout the week were lessons by teaching artists whose area of expertise was music, fine arts, dance or theater working in one of the six+ threads. Lessons were as varied as the instructors. Everyone challenged themselves by going a little bit outside their comfort zone. I did this by choosing the work of art thread. Because my work primarily focuses on vocal empowerment, I used a work of art that was a radio drama. In feedback, one TA told me how uncomfortable she was with my opening exercise. Her background was music and the exercise asked her to describe a quality in her voice. I wondered if she related this to the student in her classroom who may be uncomfortable with music. Fortunately, she shared that she enjoyed the rest of the workshop. These labs, as well as this encounter, opened my eyes to how different approaches can be from varying art forms. While our overall educational goals may be the same, our unique approach is part of who we are and what makes us artists.

I have worked in many of the purpose threads long before they were defined. I did this out of necessity when asked by school, library and community center administrators to create programs to fulfill a need. I do not believe I am unique in my exploration and programming. There are many teaching artists who do not focus solely on one thread. Few are fortunate enough to earn a living doing so. Teaching artists owe it to themselves to be the master of as many trades (or threads) as possible. Judith Hill Bose believes, "Looking at the different threads of our work allows us to hone our skills and our flexibility and be more clear and intentional about the purposes and the practices of teaching artistry."

There are so many other individuals and organizations out there doing great works. Many of



the individuals do not call themselves teaching artists. Many have never heard the term. While there is the movement nationally and internationally to connect via the Internet thanks to organizations like Teaching Artists Guild and the Association of Teaching Artists, there still seems to be many camps, many tribes, different lines of thought, and different vocabularies. How do we unite as an industry when many of us are not seeing what we do as teaching artistry? Do we have to agree on a uniform vocabulary and speak the same language? What may we lose of our individual artistry if we are all required to speak one language? Some of us are running as fast as we can, trying to survive with and through our art. We may not have time to learn another language. Can what we do speak for us? I bring this up because it is hard to be inclusive when we don't know a lot about what is going on in the field other than from the major players. By creating open or multi-pedagogical professional development, we open the doors to all so that no artist who shares their work educationally in any setting feels disenfranchised. I believe taking this direction can help artists unite, learn from each other and empower each of us with an earned place in a growing field.

## **How do we unite as an industry when many of us are not seeing what we do as teaching artistry?**

I do believe Lincoln Center Education is on the right track. Most importantly, LCE showed they are open to learning and committed to continuing wherever the road, or in this case the threads, may lead them. Speaking about the LCE program, Eric Booth shared, "This is the first time I am aware of a major player in the field looking beyond their own needs and interests to create a significant contribution to the whole of the national field." It is my hope that more organizations will offer professional development that is not pedagogically specific but rather open to all processes in a diverse field that needs to be recognized for what it can do for all learners. Because those of us who teach need to keep learning.



Elise May is an independent Teaching Artist, educator, actor, singer and storyteller who has performed and taught in the U.S. and internationally. Elise works with school districts, libraries and corporations on communications skills, community development and developing educational programs using theater arts for vocal empowerment. Using her degrees in Theatre and Communicative Disorders and Sciences, Elise developed Storytime Theater, Expressive Elocution, Multicultural Voices, Creative Readers (an arts education inclusion program for students with disabilities) and more. Her programs have successfully been in mainstream, Special Ed and ESL/ELL classrooms in multiple districts. Elise is on the board of several arts organizations, a Teaching Artist for the Tilles Center for the Performing Arts and a Steering Committee member of the Arts in Special Education Consortium. She was a

contributing writer for the Teaching Artist Journal and a contributing author of, "In It Together – How Student, Family, and Community Partnerships Advance Engagement and Achievement in Diverse Classrooms"(Zacarian, Silverstone; Corwin Press.) Elise has presented at many conferences including Balanced Mind, the Annual Conference of the Bermuda Union of Teachers, NYSTEA Educator and Student Conferences as well as to school administrators, teachers and parents. [www.storytime-theater.com](http://www.storytime-theater.com)