Teaching Artistry in the Age of Convergence:
Distributed Expertise and the Case for Outside Content Experts (OCEs)

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Convergence Academies & the Digital Media Mentor (DMM)

Convergence Academies is a whole school reform model developed and implemented in partnership between the Center for Community Arts Partnerships (CCAP) at Columbia College and two high need, traditionally low performing public schools within Chicago Public Schools (CPS). As a model demonstration project, the Convergence Academies incubates new teaching and learning strategies that can significantly increase the skills, knowledge and agency students need to thrive in a 21st century networked society.

Convergence Academies taps into a widespread movement called connected learning. Connected learning is an approach that "advocates for broadened access to learning that is socially embedded, interest-driven, and oriented toward educational, economic, or political opportunity" (Ito et al., 2013). It posits that "the most resilient forms of learning happen when the learner has a personal interest or passion they are pursuing in a context of social support, cultural affinity, and shared purpose" (Ito et al, 2013).

At the core of Convergence Academies' instructional model is a flexible staff of 20 digital media professionals known as "Digital Media Mentors" (DMMs), who serve as bridges and partners for classroom teachers striving to integrate digital media, project-based learning, and connected learning principles into their classroom.

A DMM is defined as "a practicing professional in the field of digital media with added expertise in fostering rich learning experiences for K-12 students. Fortified with this distinct combination of skills, DMMs are adept at providing teachers with the kind of tailored coaching, support and mentorship they need to teach effectively in the rapidly evolving 21st century learning ecology" (Faber).

Teaching Artists as Agents of Change

In many ways, the DMM is a new kind of Teaching Artist. According to the Association of Teaching Artists (ATA), a Teaching Artist can be understood as "a practicing professional

artist with the complementary skills and sensibilities of an educator, who engages people in learning experiences in, through, and about the arts" (Booth)[1].

Teaching artists have been a core part of programming at CCAP for more than 15 years, and the Convergence Academies builds upon and expands the possibilities for what a Teaching Artist can look like. Simultaneously the DMM paves the way for a new role in school reform efforts, which some are referring to as the Outside Content Expert (OCE)[2]. In order to understand how the OCE emerged and how it differs from previous iterations of the Teaching Artist, it is useful to look at the history of the field at large.

For this we turn to Nick Rabkin's 2011 report "Teaching Artists and the Future of Education," which took on the enormous task of cataloguing the impact of Teaching Artists (TAs) on the educational landscape over the last century.

A Historical Perspective: Why Artists Got There First

Based on Rabkin's report, this organic evolution of artists working in educational settings can be traced to three main factors, each of which evolved simultaneously over the latter half of the 20th century:

1. **Professional, working artists needed a supplementary source of income, and sought this out in ways that aligned with their creative practice.** TAs began working in social service and community-based settings as early as the 1880s. Hired to lead arts programs in the early Hull-Houses of Chicago, these artists eventually paved the way for the field that would come to be known as "community arts," and eventually, teaching artistry. Now, according to Rabkin, professional artists who work in the field earn as much as 33% of their household income from their work as teaching artists. A small number also receive insurance, pension, or other benefits through their work in the educational sector.

2. **School reform movements and budget cuts led to elimination of in-school arts instruction.** Just as professional artists were starting to discover the value of their practice in an educational setting, national educational policy and budget cuts in the 70s and 80s led to fewer positions for formal arts teachers in the schools. Rabkin writes, "some principals, determined that their students should have access to arts education despite the cuts, found they could mitigate the damage by bringing in arts education programs offered by arts organizations to their schools."

3. **Research began to demonstrate the alignment of artistic skills, habits and dispositions with high-quality approaches teaching & learning.** As Rabkin puts it "TAs are expert at the kind of teaching the research identified as high quality, and

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[1] http://www.teachingartists.com/whatisaTeachingArtists.htm
[2] http://www.nctaf.org/learningstudiostoolkit/

they promote it in the schools where they work. We found this approach to teaching, in some respects, is a consequence of dispositions woven into TAs' identities as artists and the complex of mental processes that are integral to making works of art – vision and planning; imagination; discipline; attention to detail; seeing the whole; pattern making, finding and breaking; reflection, revision and assessment; persistence; judgment; spontaneity and play among them." According to renowned improvisational artist Viola Spolin, "the theater-game workshop… offers students the opportunity for equal freedom, respect, and responsibility within the community of the schoolroom." "Spolin could have been quoting from the literature on good teaching, but it had not yet been written when she developed her theater games" (Rabkin).

Together, these three factors created a perfect storm of mutual need and shared goals, and the artist emerged as the primary example of an outsider lending valuable expertise in a classroom setting.

The Evolution of the Outside Content Expert

Over the last 50 years, TAs have had a tremendous impact on the educational landscape -- both as educators in their own right, and as innovators bringing meaningful, hands-on approaches to learning to both formal and informal institutions. "As quasi-outsiders, with relative freedom from the constraints and norms of schools, TAs can introduce innovation and change that has been slow to come from the inside alone" (Rabkin). Indeed, by involving a professional from the world outside the school in the learning community, principals and administrators reap the benefits of a unique set of skills, a fresh perspective, and a flexible approach to what teaching and learning might look like. Though schools may not always enter into such an arrangement with large-scale change in mind (often it is the resources or access that are more alluring), the introduction of outside perspectives into a school setting inevitably provokes curiosity around how school does and might function.

After all, change is slow. As Convergence Academies Faculty Fellow Alexios Moore puts it, "you can't 'turnaround' a school in three to five years, but you can train teachers to approach instruction differently if you link at different levels of the organization and create sustainable learning communities."

In more recent years, the term "Outside Content Expert" or "OCE" has evolved as a more inclusive name for any sort of non-educational specialist working in this way in a school setting. According to the The National Commission on Teaching & America's Future (NCTAF), an OCE is defined as "a workforce professional that works with a teacher team to provide content expertise, resources, and curricular coaching." While OCEs certainly *include* artists, the term is broad enough to also encompass urban planners, coders, game developers, scientists, architects, programmers – anyone with a set of skills or expertise that could be valuable in a learning context.

Here, the word "content" refers not just to the body of knowledge in a particular academic discipline, but also to a wide array of skills, habits, and dispositions pertaining to fields outside of traditional academic contexts -- but which have deep relevance and applicability within the classroom. Generally speaking, students that effectively participate in collaborative and interdisciplinary problem-solving teams are increasingly being seen as possessing the kind of creative mindsets and processes that translate into college and workforce readiness skills.

Unlike the emergence of the TA, the OCE is largely a 21st century development. To explain this, we can return to the three factors cited above:

1. **Professional, working artists needed a supplementary source of income, and sought this out in ways that aligned with their creative practice.** Professionals working in the fields that make up the OCE population are often representing well-paid creative industries. Though they may hold similar creative practices and values to artists, scientists and other innovative professionals did not need to pursue alternative income in the same way. This continues to pose a barrier for recruiting certain types of content experts to work in and alongside teachers in schools.

2. **School reform movements and budget cuts led to elimination of in-school arts instruction.** Just as in the above example, there is a disconnect between how our culture values the arts, as compared to other creative industries. A common example of OCEs currently can be found in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) fields. While this particular combination of disciplines is often underrepresented in learning spaces, positions teaching science and math have never been systematically eliminated from schools in the same way that arts teachers have, and principals are rarely required to supplement instruction in these areas to the same degree.

3. **Research began to demonstrate the alignment of artistic skills, habits and dispositions with high-quality teaching & learning.** Many of the most common creative industries currently included in the demographics of the OCE – game designers, animators, hackers, creative technologists – are relatively recent career paths. As a result, there has been much less research about the potential value of integrating these types of media-based expertise into learning spaces.

Distributed Expertise: Teaching in the Age of Convergence

Unlike some of the early teaching artist models, which were modeled after the "artist-in-residence" or "visiting artist" structure, the OCE (along with many contemporary iterations of teaching artistry) is designed not to teach on their own but to work in tandem with a teacher to collaboratively improve the quality and scope of education students are receiving. According to one project,

"Rather than operating as 'purveyors of knowledge,' the OCEs worked to adapt expertise to local contexts and judiciously applied pressure to stretch horizons of practice. This required listening, flexibility, and a genuine investment in understanding teachers' project goals, plans, and rationale. It also required significant time and patience as OCEs carefully selected language and strategically positioned suggestions to nudge thinking forward in small increments of change" (Ermeling & Yarbro[3]).

This model operates on the basis of what has been referred to as "distributed expertise," which proposes that the diversity of skills and knowledge possessed by a team of educators ultimately does a better job fulfilling the varied needs of a classroom (Brown, et. al.). In other words, rather than supplementing teachers with outside OCEs, these two populations can actually work together to build a richer, more complex classroom experience.

As one researcher studying the Convergence Academies model put it: "The types of expertise exhibited by first grade teachers diverged from the types of expertise showcased by practicing digital media professionals" (Woodard).

As was true of arts-based enrichment programs before teaching artistry took root, OCEs in the field of digital media have long been providing supplementary learning experiences in this vein to students in informal spaces. Connected learning models such as Computer Clubhouse (Kaffai, Peppler and Chapman, 2009) have been designed and have been proven effective in cultivating connected learning experiences within out of school settings. Similarly, earlier iterations of the Digital Youth Network (DYN) model (Barron, Gomez, Pinkard and Martin, 2013) have been designed within out of school settings with some integration into the school day. Lastly, the Quest to Learn (Q2L) model uses a game-based, connected learning approach to designing new schools, infrastructures, and systems (Salen, 2011). Yet few instructional models bring OCEs directly into schools to work with students, teachers and school leaders to design and engage in connected learning opportunities.

Building Teacher Capacity: 5 Core Roles of an OCE

As noted above, the role of the OCE requires not just outside content expertise, but a complex network of creative skills, habits, and dispositions – many of which align with those qualities that have made teaching artists such a valuable asset to struggling schools since the mid 20th century.

Throughout the course of the Convergence Academies initiative, we observed, documented, and gathered input from teachers, administrators, students, and DMMs about how this unique role functioned in supporting teachers and schools in implementing a connected learning framework.

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[3]http://researchnetwork.pearson.com/wp-content/uploads/Ermeling-ExpandingHorizons-CondensedReport-091114-2.pdf#sthash.QYO0Tkow.dpuf
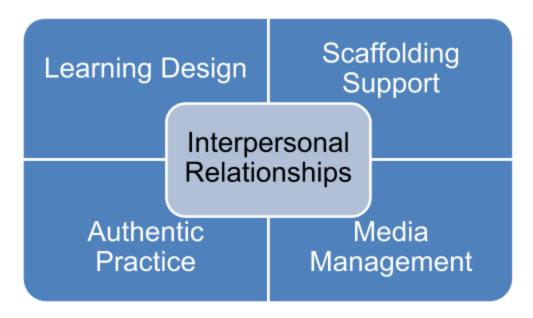
This type of peer mentorship between DMMs & teachers occurred in multiple spaces:

- Grade level / Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings
- One-on-one, scheduled meetings
- In-class co-teaching time
- Informal / off-the-cuff time (between classes, at lunch, etc.)

Based on these interactions, we have identified five core capacities that an OCE engages when supporting teacher growth and development. The roles identified below are overlapping and porous. We found that DMMs regularly shifted in and out of each role, depending on the needs of a particular teacher or classroom scenario.

In the charts below, these five functions of an OCE are explained in-depth. At the core are the interpersonal relationships formed between these outside experts and the teachers working directly in the schools:

Detailed descriptions and real, on-the-ground examples of each role can be found in the chart below:

Role	Definition	Example
Interpersonal Relationships *Motivational Coach and Critical Friend*	Gives teachers emotional support and encouragement, and supports them through insecurities, fears, and confusions around new approaches to teaching. Keeps teachers focused on their goals.	Meets with teacher between classes to review plans.

	Brings a critical perspective to teachers' understanding of a certain topic or genre; offers activities, frameworks, or resources culled from relevant fields of knowledge; offers new teaching strategies and activities, new possibilities for what a classroom can look like; offers opportunity to dialogue with someone who is "outside" the school.	Schedules a time outside the classroom in an informal location to strategize, reflect, and discuss teaching challenges.

IN THEIR WORDS

"I sat in and observed what he was doing…before the unit started, and it was PowerPoints up there, where he would pretty much read directly off. […] As soon as a new slide comes up, [the students] would look up, copy it down, and then go back to talking or whatever. As soon as we started doing the actual unit where we gave them things to play with, they were all engaged and asking questions…That was fun to see that shift."

Role	Definition	Example
Learning Design *Unit Co-Designer and Project Manager*	Supports teacher in developing thorough and rigorous units, helps teacher understand backwards design process and how to integrate media from the beginning Keeps teachers on task and helps them vision different components of a long-term project; providing PBL supports and strategies for building teachers' self-sufficiency and self-efficacy moving forward	Meets with teacher to help structure a classroom video editing process. Helps the teacher develop worksheets to use throughout a unit to track progress.

IN THEIR WORDS

"I hear a lot where it is like, 'Oh, the kids do not want to do this.' I always thought it was part of your responsibility is create an environment or understanding where students want to learn whatever you are teaching."

Authentic Practice *Real-World Connector and Disciplinary Specialist*	Helps teachers connect classroom study to personal or professional contexts in the world outside the classroom and/or in the lives of students; brings own artistic practice/habits into the classroom	Brings in samples from personal blog to show how blogging can help students solve math problems.

| | Offers a particular expertise or skillset that expands the range of study in the classroom; helps teacher understand relevant skills, knowledge, and vocabulary in a particular discipline | Leads weekly yoga sessions with students to help teacher understand how to connect to social-emotional learning |

Role	Definition	Example
Media Manager *Tool-torial Helper and Media Librarian*	Helps teacher understand how to use and apply certain technical skills or tools in their classroom	Trains a teacher on how to use Photoshop.
	Researches relevant media, culture, and other examples to support curricular goals of teacher; connects teachers to online communities and resources that interest them.	Creates a curated album of relevant photography to support a teacher's lesson in visual literacy.

| **Scaffolding Support**

Co-Teaching Support and Documentarian | **In the classroom:** sets up protocols, collaborative structures, and checkpoints for students along the way to completing a unit; provides fresh eyes and new perspective for relating to students & classroom space. | Shows a teacher how to set up desks to facilitate effective teamwork with tripods and iPads. |
| | **Outside the classroom:** captures and reflects upon classroom events; helps teacher organize and store media and other artifacts; encourages and supports teacher in sharing of student work. | Brings video of classroom experiences to school team meetings to use a reflective tool. |

IN THEIR WORDS

"Different teachers wanted different levels of involvement in the classroom - some wanted more help in planning, others in implementing. Each teacher tended to need a different kind of support/finesse, more hands on, or off"

Implications for Future Programming

Citizenship and careers of the future demand a robust set of skills, including collaboration, creative problem-solving, digital citizenship and critical analysis. Yet, many Chicago area schools lack the supports they need to transform classrooms into resilient technology rich, collaborative communities that cultivate these academic mindsets and behaviors. School leaders and teachers need cost-effective and proven strategies for transforming schools into creative problem-solving learning environments that are truly centered around the authentic needs and interests of diverse learners.

In just a few short years of programming, Convergence Academies has seen the valuable impact of the OCE on teacher practice and student learning. The academic behaviors and mindsets that lead to success in school, as well as to healthy participation in public life, begin with opportunities in and beyond the classroom to engage in relevant, meaningful and real-world learning.

Through the use of OCEs and other instruction supports, Convergence Academies aims to bring this kind of hands-on learning, real world relevance and creative inquiry to schools so that diverse learners are authentically prepared for active participation in today's globally connected world.