

Communities, Schools and the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals

ITAC THINK TANK: March 2020

Hosted by Tricia Tunstall (USA)

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.

In March of 2020, Tricia Tunstall led a highly interactive session with members of the ITAC community. While the discussion sections are not featured in this archive, Tricia deftly presents the ways in which the SDGs can be viewed as an opportunity for case making in the arts.

Instances in which the text is in [brackets] or (parentheses) indicates when the transcriber was not certain of the speaker's original word choice. Ellipses in parentheses or brackets indicate when the sound was indecipherable for transcription.

Tricia Tunstall 0:02

I'm delighted to be here. So happy to have a chance to be part of the ITAC Think Tank. It is very important initiative and really happy to be with you, all of you in this new normal way that we are together, which is suddenly so incredibly crucial to our lives.

Tricia Tunstall 0:22

I'm going to start right out, diving into our subject by asking all of you a question. And you can add - I'd love it if you would write your answers - just a few words, short phrase into the chatbox. And here's the question: what is the boldest claim that you can make about the impact of your work as a teaching artist? The boldest claim you can make about the impact of your work as a teaching artist. And if you're a program administrator, I would sort of think about this on behalf of your teaching artists, what's the boldest claim you can make about the impact of the work that they do? I'm going to give you a few minutes to start writing things in the chat box - just a couple of words, or a short phrase.

Tricia Tunstall 1:14

Our work changes lives and thus changes the world. Beautiful. Anybody else?

Tricia Tunstall 1:21

We create a more inclusive way of practicing creative writing. That's lovely.

Tricia Tunstall 1:25

I have helped students see a world outside of their challenges.

Tricia Tunstall 1:30

Bringing students back to learning and changing the way communities and people see themselves.

Tricia Tunstall 1:36

They learn so much poetry in so little time. Beautiful!

Tricia Tunstall 1:40

This is going faster than I can even read them! Beautiful!

Tricia Tunstall 1:48

We offer access. We are creating Global Citizen artists. Students become the inspirations for others.

Tricia Tunstall 1:57

We've worked with over 20,000 New York City students this year. Our projects provide a way for people to feel included. We open the doors for people to experience the world through the lens of art.

Tricia Tunstall 2:08

My work brought small groups of folks together.

Tricia Tunstall 2:11

I'm going to hope that you'll just keep going. And I'm going to talk a little bit about this. You'll notice that most of the comments - not all but most - are about the way the arts changes people's lives. And this is something that we all know deeply in our bones as artists and as teachers, that the arts change people's lives. We usually however, talk about that in terms of individuals, sometimes in terms of individuals together. But in terms of the way an individual's life is impacted by art, we don't so much tend to talk about the way that our work might influence whole communities. There, I saw a few comments fly by there about creating community. But mostly, we think and talk about, and the way we experience our own work when we're in it, is in the experience of changing people's lives one at a time. And I think the idea of that we can also change lives - change the lives of humans and community and change the lives of whole communities in really crucial ways, is an idea that we need to start thinking about, because that is something that people around the world, I've discovered, are actually beginning to believe.

Tricia Tunstall 3:32

There are many more - there are increasing initiatives around the world of people using arts and using culture to actually create and contribute to social change, and even economic change, and even environmental change. So this is a big change. I'm going to read to you, and show on my screen if I can manage to do this, some quotes that I have come across to this end, that are sort of around this like are

some of the quotes that I have heard and I'm going to read them just in case you can't quite see them. I have four quotes up here.

Tricia Tunstall 4:11

The first one is from the Culture 2030 Goal campaign, which is part of the International Institute for Sustainable Development and they say, "Full recognition of culture as a driver and enabler of social development can open up new possibilities to accelerate progress across the board."

Tricia Tunstall 4:29

Then there's one from the African Union. 12 African nations agreed to spearhead the systematic integration of culture, arts and heritage into the African Union's development agenda. "The arts and culture have historically been overlooked as contributors to achieving social economic goals across the continent but that is now changing."

Tricia Tunstall 4:51

The third one is from the Federal Reserve Bank, which is not a place I normally tend to look for this kind of post, but here it is. "There is an evolving era in community development that infuses art and cultural practice. Artists are working with communities and organizations to tackle some of the most pressing and complex issues of our time."

Tricia Tunstall 5:13

And finally, the one from UNESCO says, "the arts are a powerful means of engendering the skills and knowledge needed to create and promote sustainable development, including sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, a culture of peace, global citizenship, and cultural diversity." That's UNESCO.

Tricia Tunstall 5:34

So the gist of all of these quotations is this. People in power, people in positions of power across the world, are really starting to think about the arts, arts education, arts initiatives, as ways to achieve really important social and economic change. This is new. In my experience, as an artist for a very long time and a teacher for a very long time we - it is different from the arts changed people's lives in the way that we were used to thinking about it. I would say that it's not a widespread idea, yet. There are - there are certainly many organizations and individuals in these positions of power to create change, who don't - haven't heard this idea, or aren't convinced of it yet. But some have. And I believe that the more this idea spreads, the more potential arts, artists, and arts educators have to really have a kind of power and impact in our work that we have never had before. And the more that this idea spreads, the more the arts are going to slowly move from the margins of cultural life - the after school programs, the elective subjects - and will move actually toward the center of crucial policy decision making in organizations and even in nation states.

Tricia Tunstall 7:04

Can you imagine that? Really? It's very hard to imagine being having grown up and done our work all these years in the world where that didn't happen. But I believe that is going to begin to happen. And I

think we need to imagine that happening. Because I see quotes like this, and many others like this, that are beginning to move in this direction. And I think that we as artists, as arts educators, as citizen artists are really important as agents of this change.

Tricia Tunstall 7:39

I'm going to show you another slide now. This is the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. So a little tiny bit of history: in 2015, the United Nations General Assembly developed this set of 17 sustainable development goals, and agreed upon them as the crucial guidelines for the decade from 2020 to 2030. And the issue is that they are not - they're not universally known, but more and more they are coming to guide a lot of decisions that are made in the UN, made by UN agencies, and by other NGOs and organizations around the world.

Tricia Tunstall 8:20

So take just a little while, I'm going to give you a minute or two, to familiarize yourself with them. I'm actually going to read them to you in case you can't see them. One is no poverty. Two: zero hunger. Three: good health and well being. Four: quality of education. Five: gender equality. Six: clean water and sanitation. Seven: affordable and clean energy. Eight: decent work and economic growth. Nine: industry innovation and infrastructure. 10: reduced inequalities. 11: sustainable cities and communities. 12: responsible consumption and production. 13: climate action. 14: life below water. 15: life on land. 16: peace, justice and strong institutions. And 17: partnerships for the goals.

Unknown Speaker 9:26

You're going to share these slides with us?

Tricia Tunstall 9:28

Yes, absolutely. Madeleine -

Unknown Speaker 9:30

I don't need to take it all down then?

Tricia Tunstall 9:32

No, no, no, no, you'll have that right. Yes, you'll have them.

Tricia Tunstall 9:37

So these are the goals that are right now currently in the world guiding the decisions about how to change lives in developing countries and communities. All around the world. These are the big ones. They've been adopted by many, many organizations, agencies, governments, entities. You'll notice that they cover a range of things, economic things, social things, even a lot of environmental things. You'll also notice that they do not mention the arts. This is where we come in. And this is our challenge, and our opportunity to start really learning how to make the case that what we do is crucial for meeting these goals. So that is really what we're going to talk about today.

Tricia Tunstall 10:28

In the the year since these Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs, as we call them, ... and they're called that because it's quite a mouthful to say every time. These SDGs have been out there for five years. And in those years, what have most institutions, and agencies and banks, and so forth been doing in order to try to meet these goals. I can tell you, a lot of them? They are they are introducing new water filtration systems, new agricultural techniques. They are building schools, they are building health clinics, they are building roads and addressing infrastructure. They're working on election reform. Arts education and arts? Not really yet, not so much. This is where we come in.

Tricia Tunstall 11:24

Last May, I was invited to go to the World Bank in Washington for a day to spend time talking to them about my research with El Sistema. And the reason I got this invitation, which I hadn't expected, is I was invited to do a podcast by an economist at the World Bank, who also does an arts podcast. And he was so interested in the way that I was talking about the changes El Sistema can engender that he decided he wanted more people at the World Bank to sort of hear about this.

Tricia Tunstall 11:56

So I went for a full day, something I didn't ever imagine myself doing, and talked to them about these sort of - these people who are very used to thinking about water filtration systems and health clinics. And I talked to them about the changes that I have seen El Sistema make, be able to make and foster and evolve within communities. I've seen neighborhoods actually change for the better. I've seen job opportunities actually increase. Things like that - things above and beyond the story of the individual.

Tricia Tunstall 12:30

And when I finished, a senior manager, one of the bosses there, came over to me and said, "You know, I've been doing this work for 25 years. And in all this time that I've been working really hard to help developing countries and improve their lifestyles and have a better life and have positive outcomes, I have never ever once thought about investing in the arts."

Tricia Tunstall 12:58

So I'm going to imagine today that all of you are someday maybe you have already. If you haven't, I'm imagining you will have a chance to meet yourself with this guy. And I'm talking about generically this guy. This guy who is used to thinking in very material terms about how to help developing countries and institute change for the better. And I want you to imagine that you have his ear and his attention. And I would like to do a sort of thought experiment with you today to prepare you for that moment, which I hope comes, which is this: let's imagine you had that guy's ear and his attention or hers. And you needed to make the boldest and strongest argument you could for why the work that you do, as a teaching artist, as an artist, as an administrator, can really help address one or two of these goals or many of these goals. Here's what - here's how I'd like to start. I'm going to leave that up for a while. If I can. Madeline, can I leave that up and still activate the chat box? Do I = how do I do that?

Madeleine 14:15

If you move your mouse along the bottom, do you see some options?

Tricia Tunstall 14:20

I see them on the top, but I see... Oh, I see chat. There you go. All right. So what I'd like you to do is this. Think about these goals. You could really you think you could really make a strong argument for that one of these goals. You could really make the argument for that. The work you do - the work artists do really could help to achieve one of these goals or two of these goals.

Tricia Tunstall 14:49

Let's write down and I'm going to start this off. I'm going to start off by choosing number three. Good health and well being. Okay, that's my first goal that I'm going to try to defend. And I'm going to say that I - the reason I chose it is that I really believe that El Sistema and arts programs in general, affect the... affect the community, feeling of well being. They build social bonds. There is less substance abuse. There are healthy alternative leisure times, I'm sorry, healthy leisure time alternatives, is what I meant to say. Fewer involvement with gangs and drugs. Less loneliness and depression. All of those things create good health and well being, not only for individuals, but for an entire community.

Tricia Tunstall 15:47

So your turn, I'd love to see you write into the box one or two of these that you think you could make an argument for and then we'll look at them and talk about them. Anybody else want to jump in?

Unknown Speaker 16:05

Do we all see the chat box?

Tricia Tunstall 16:08

Ah, quality. Oh, I see people are are jumping in? Um, I see the chat box. Can you see it?

Unknown Speaker 16:18

I somehow got stuck. Okay, nevermind.

Tricia Tunstall 16:22

You got it?

Unknown Speaker 16:23

Yep.

Tricia Tunstall 16:24

Okay, I'm seeing you now. I see number 16, which is peace, justice and strong institutions. Playback theater. You don't even have to make your argument here yet. We're gonna start doing that in a minute. But there's a beautiful argument here already. Playback theater has proven to reduce social tensions in crisis and in reconciliation, as in Rwanda, Burundi.

Tricia Tunstall 16:49

Another one for 16. I have quality education, which is number four, (...) quality education. I see that a reach is peace, justice and strong institutions maybe and sustainable cities and communities. Reduced

inequality, responsible consumption. Yeah. All right, let's start talking of that. And for number seven, affordable and clean energy: someone is currently working on a project to educate children about the pros and cons of hydro electricity.

Tricia Tunstall 17:26

So we've covered or at least mentioned, the majority of these goals, just now in this session, I'm going to stop sharing it so that we can end by sort of - faces! Because right, I know, I wanted to keep that up there just just so that you can really get familiar with it, those who haven't done it. But yes, I want to be able to, to send us off with a feeling of having been with everybody that we've been with.

Tricia Tunstall 17:57

This is not about changing what you do. This is about changing how you might be able to frame what you do, in accordance with a very powerful rubric, a very, very powerful set of goals. Powerful in the world, in that how many people are now looking at it, turning to it for guidance, calling it their, you know, their True North - those SDGs.

Tricia Tunstall 18:23

So if we can, if we can start to think about what we do in ways that clearly speak to those 17 SDGs, we will be aligning ourselves with new partners, with new sources of power, with new sort of currents in our world that are in that - that comprise power, that comprise effectiveness - we can be more actionable, and we can actually become more powerful and strong in those in those partnerships.

Tricia Tunstall 19:03

What I'm going to do is take the chat box that we filled up so beautifully. And the recording that Madeleine will give me and I will, in thanks and appreciation, for everybody who's contributed and spoken here today. And come here, I'm going to create a sample letter, a dear SDG, I mean, dear - Sorry, dear NGO letter, and I'm going to sort of compile all the arguments that we've made for these various SDGs so that you can have them all - so that you can remember them. You can use them hopefully, as you go about looking for conversations with people who live in this sort of investment world - in the world of investing in development, sustainable development. Look for those people that wouldn't usually come across your radar screen. They're not necessarily in your community, they're not - I mean, I never went looking for the World Bank. It was - that was fortuitous, and I now I'm going to be more purposeful in looking for people and trying to access different - that whole community and way of thinking in different ways so that we can have conversations with the World Bank, with UNESCO, with the UN, with your local bank who's interested in developments and funding and loans and things like that, with philanthropic funders who are interested in funding development.

Tricia Tunstall 20:31

We can begin to have this conversation and just insert ourselves and insert the idea that what we are doing every single day is actually furthering their goals. They just need to know that. They need to know it and they need to support us in our work. And that's sort of the bottom line, right?

Tricia Tunstall 20:52

Um, thank you to everybody. I'm going to get this letter out and I hope that it spurs you to sort of look for possible partners, possible people you can start conversations with whom you haven't thought of before.