

BACKGROUNDER -- ARTS FOR ACHIEVEMENT: About The Royal Conservatory of Music's Learning Through the Arts[®] Youth Empowerment Program

What are the origins of the Learning Through the Arts[®] Youth Empowerment Program?

Learning Through the Arts[®] was conceived by The Royal Conservatory of Music's president and CEO, Dr. Peter Simon, in 1994. The program was developed to address concerns about the effects of widespread loss of music and arts programming in schools.

LTTA evolved out of the premise that school teachers who are encouraged to make teaching and learning a practice that is participatory, active, and connected to the personal interests and learning style of each student are the most effective in achieving academic, social, and personal development in their students. Teachers, like students, also learn best through direct, hands-on experiences. Collaborating in the classroom with LTTA's certified artist-educators enables this type of learning to come to life. It is thanks to the combination of experiential student learning, classroom-based teacher professional development, and specialized artist training that LTTA has become one of the most intensive differentiated instruction programs in the world.

In 2010, the Conservatory was given the chance to prove that intensive arts-based educational programming could promote the academic and social success of youth in a modern-day boomtown, through an offer of support from the Alberta government's *Safe Communities Innovation Fund* and Suncor Energy Foundation to test the program in Fort McMurray, Alberta, as well as with other schools in the Wood Buffalo region.

To date, more than 50 studies on the effects of LTTA programming have been completed. The research has consistently shown benefits to not only students, but also teachers, principals, and LTTA artist-educators. The research resulting from LTTA's work in the Wood Buffalo region has proven to be the most compelling to date on all fronts.

How does it work?

The LTTA Youth Empowerment Program brings Conservatory-trained dramatic and visual artists, musicians, dancers and writers to work creatively with teachers and community program coordinators to engage young people more deeply in their school learning, and stimulate life skills development through out-of-school activities. The program's goals are to foster enhanced school attachment and achievement, cultivate self-esteem and positive cultural identity, encourage pro-social activity, and build creativity and resilience.

YEP includes rigorous training in arts-based instructional methods for teachers. In the 2012-13 school year alone, 100 Grade 6 to 9 teachers in the Fort McMurray Catholic School District received a combined 2,000 hours of job-embedded training, working closely with specially-trained artist-educators, who each received over 240 hours of Royal Conservatory training that year.

As a result, approximately 3,000 students received a minimum of 20 hours of YEP every year, and additional access to ongoing afterschool programming and summer camps.

What is an example of arts-based teaching and learning?

Learning – and Learning Through the Arts – is all about making connections.

Teachers understand how important it is to help students bridge to a new idea from something familiar. But sometimes, finding that connection is not easy.

Case in point: the Cartesian plane. It is a way of thinking about location in two-dimensional space - the familiar “x” and “y” axes. That can be challenging for students to grasp because we spend all of our time living in 3D.

LTTA artist-educators in Fort McMurray who were tasked with bringing this concept to life landed on a creative idea: lay out a giant Cartesian grid on the classroom floor – a two-dimensional space that students could interact with, experiencing physically how two and three dimensions connect, and engaging their natural sense of direction – the connection they needed to make sense of the plane.

These artist-educators then created an engaging activity in which students had to find a specific location on the grid. Now they were becoming “points.” Next, they were asked to create characters and make up rules that would cause their character to have to change a position. They started using X and Y as short cuts to finding these new locations. And teachers now had a framework to introduce the idea of an equation as a kind of rule to choose these new locations.

Exciting! The artist-educators had helped students connect the Cartesian plane to their concept of space, and equations to their idea of a rule. From there, the teacher and her class could move forward confidently in playing with these mathematical concepts.

This is just one of dozens of such innovative ideas developed in Fort McMurray and other LTTA programs.

Students get excited by LTTA because we are teaching them the way they were made to learn – drawing on their creativity, and connecting the physical, emotional and intellectual ways of knowing something – all in engaging, hands-on and fun activities.

Researchers have found that this interconnected approach helps students learn concepts deeply. Two separate studies found that students could recall an LTTA lesson three or even five years later, in vivid detail, like it had just happened.

Learning to work well with others is a major side benefit of the program's collaborative learning approach. And the arts-based activities are specifically designed to engage students of all backgrounds and abilities, so the work actively promotes inter-cultural understanding.

Learning Through the Arts recognizes that it takes teachers time to get comfortable with this new way of teaching. Our programming is built around a sophisticated understanding of how teachers learn, including how much support they need in the classroom, and how much time they need outside of the classroom to plan, train and discuss these new tools that advance their teaching practice.

Sometimes this means supporting teachers in understanding what makes their students tick. In Fort McMurray, we help them become familiar with aboriginal culture, so they can create connections that are meaningful to their First Nations, Métis and Inuit students.

Our results in Fort McMurray are so impressive because we were able to intensify programming and shorten the learning curve. We've offered 20 hours of in-class programming each year that has featured co-teaching with Conservatory-trained artist-educators, compared to the eight hours typical in many of our initiatives. We've also co-created and delivered over nine intensive professional development sessions on topics like successful artist-teacher collaboration, tackling difficult learning topics, and aboriginal ways of knowing.

We're proud to say that by the third year, teachers were adapting to this new way of thinking. Many were using LTTA teaching methods on their own, not just when artist-educators were present in the classroom. And student success soared as a result.

How was the LTTA Youth Empowerment Program evaluated in the Wood Buffalo Region?

For the first three years of the program (2010-13), data were gathered through combinations of interviews, questionnaires, focus group discussions, school board documentation and observations. Qualitative data were analyzed for emerging themes and patterns. Quantitative data were analyzed for frequencies of response and for statistically significant changes in responses to the same questions posed by researchers prior to and at the end of each year's programming.

To track changes in academic achievement, students participating in YEP programming were tracked on their performance in the provincial achievement tests (PATs) for those subject areas in which they had YEP classes – Language Arts, Social Studies and Mathematics. The results were logged taking the pre-programming spring 2010 scores as a baseline and comparing them to the spring 2013 scores that marked the end of three years of YEP programming.

Have these results been independently reviewed by education experts?

The research results report was reviewed by several noted academics, including Dr. Lee Willingham of Laurier University, Dr. Lawrence O'Farrell of Queen's University, and Winnie Chow-Horn, an education consultant with a focus on FNMI / Culturally Responsive Practice, and past research manager and course instructor for the University of Alberta. All reviewers concluded that the findings of the Youth Empowerment Program study in Wood Buffalo Region are directly tied to the integration of the arts into core curriculum subjects.

What is the cost on a per-student basis?

The Youth Empowerment Program can cost as low as \$116 per student, depending on the level, reach, and intensity of delivery. The program offered in the Wood Buffalo region was one of the more intensive versions offered, and currently costs \$163 per student.

Apart from significantly improved test scores, what are the program's benefits?

There are many: Participation in the program led to attendant boosts to self-confidence and hope among students. The development of strong math and language skills is a proven determinant of success, both in higher education and in seeking meaningful employment among young people. And not least, improvements have been noted in inter-cultural understanding and social dynamics in district schools.

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