

TRANSCRIPT

Amplifying New Voices: International Collaboration in the Arts

Christine Vincent
Program Officer
(1992-2001)
The Ford Foundation

The foundation has a long-standing commitment to creativity in the arts, and that's important to underscore. By that I mean supporting artists to create art – not only museums to exhibit art or only dance and theater and opera companies to present these things, but actually supporting artists to create art.

When I arrived at the foundation, I undertook a review of the existing portfolio and the existing work. I started to observe that an emerging trend was the increase in the United States-based international collaborations.

We were at a fascinating moment, in which people were understanding that international activity actually takes place here in the United States. Certainly there were audiences interested in exchange with Europe, but there was powerful interest in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

The following story is based on the experience of a grant maker and her grantee partners. Together they sought to improve the quality of U.S.-based international collaborations by inviting artists from abroad and co-creating performances. Experiences and best practices, drawn from the partnerships, further served to help these organizations become leaders in the field of international artistic collaboration. Grant makers working in other fields will appreciate insights on issues such as:

- Engaging grantees with an unexpected opportunity to expand their work
- Introducing ethnographic methods to enhance the learning process
- Encouraging grantees to share experiences through conferences and publications

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Identifying Grantees

Christine Vincent We commissioned a study that included scanning the range of work, collecting information about the work, and arranging a whole series of convenings so that I was able to meet with people, artists, and arts leaders active in the field and interested in this issue.

There was enormous promise around these kinds of collaborations, but there were terrific barriers and a lot of the projects were suffering. They were struggling because they had not had enough time to plan and prepare for a project. Or they were struggling because the people and the artists really lacked practical knowledge. It was clear that a majority was interested in this kind of work on an occasional basis, although there were certainly a few folks who had committed a lifetime of involvement to this and had developed some knowledge. What I found was that a very interesting, broader set of organizations were engaged. Different kinds of organizations that had different expertise could contribute to the general knowledge of how you do this work.

Based on what we learned from the study I made a choice that we would identify a core set of grantees who were prepared to and interested in working in an ongoing, consistent way on these issues. It turned out to be five: two folks working in Asia, two in Latin America, and one in Africa. The other organization with which I wanted to work was financially unstable and simply unable to engage this opportunity. You encounter all those kinds of things. I was very tempted to try to engage them and ask them to do this work, but what I realized is that the difficulty of this work would make it impossible for them to succeed given their financial instability.

There were some organizations that felt they should have been in this core set and they weren't for various reasons. That was a judgement call that I had to make. It wasn't saying these are the best organizations. It was saying that this was a set of organizations that together as a cohort can provide the leadership and can speak in the broadest way to the field.

Mikki Shepherd
Executive Director
(1987-1996)
651 ARTS Many organizations and many of my own colleagues wondered why we were getting the money as opposed to some other organizations. Traditionally, for large initiatives with that size grant budget being given you'd go to more established organizations. Christine didn't go that route. She decided to go with organizations that, although small, had a commitment to a particular region of the world.

Christine Vincent I did a lot of explaining that they had been chosen as grantees not because they had wonderful programs – because they did – but because they could be part of this larger whole and I expected, and the foundation wanted, leadership from them on that basis.

Judy Mitoma
Director
Center for Intercultural
Performance, UCLA I remember getting a phone call. It was in June. Out of the blue I find out Christine Vincent of the Ford Foundation is calling me. I had not met her, I did not know her. Christine called and explained that she was starting a new initiative. It sounded exactly like what I had been doing for the last twenty years. I think she knew that at UCLA I had had great success with those graduate students. If you can do this on campus with these kinds of people, perhaps something at a larger scale could be equally successful. The blessing, in addition to the invitation to apply, was that she gave me some planning money to actually put the proposal together. That was unbelievable. With that money, I was able to get the assistance I needed to really think through this, do some traveling, talk to some people and actually come up with a proposal. It wasn't something that was untested. They were all natural progressions from work I had been doing before. As a result I knew it would work.

Maureen Knighton
Executive Director
651 ARTS What our participation in this program has allowed us to do is expand what we were doing in the first place. It allowed us to make that leap – to work in a much larger way and to network more extensively than we would have had we not been able to participate in the program.

Mikki Shepherd Christine allowed each of the grantees to determine what they thought the best mechanism would be for their own organizations. I think it was experimental, quite frankly, to see what would be the best practices that would surface out of these five organizations.

Documenting What Happened

Christine Vincent When we presented the grant for these five local centers, Susan Berresford said – very insightfully, of course, “How are you going to know what experience the artists have in all of this process? How are you going to know how the artists are treated, how they experience this activity, and what their view on things is?” Excellent question. I went back to some conversations I had had and some experiments I had done at the foundation, encouraged by colleagues in some other divisions actually. They would use the technique of ethnographic documentation.

The purpose of the ethnographic documentation was to provide information on an ongoing basis to the grantees about what artists were experiencing, what audiences were experiencing, and what their own staff and they themselves were experiencing during the process. As opposed to doing 10 years of work with them and then giving them an evaluation at the end and saying, “Here’s a bunch of lessons and too bad this is over.”

That involved going back to the New England Foundation for the Arts, which had done the original study, and asking them to develop this piece. It was bumpy going at first.

Sam Miller
Executive Director
New England Foundation for
the Arts

Anxiety existed on the part of the site because this was something that was imposed on them at the beginning. They felt that it might actually be a covert form of evaluation. I think Doug Dinatale and Karen Ito, who worked with the sites to choose ethnographers, did a good job. One of the things that helped was the choice itself. We didn’t choose them and then send them in. We, in a way, co-chose them with the sites. So they were comfortable, and in some cases knew these people. The information was fed back to the sites almost in real time. That’s a big departure, and it’s where the trust comes from and also where the benefit comes from with the sites.

Karen Ito
Co-Director
ICA Ethnographers Team

We had the first meeting at the Ford Foundation and Christine left it to us to try to decide the best way to develop the ethnographic process and to develop the team. We did not meet with her as an ethnographic team, which was very good because that provided a sense of integrity to the team that we were not evaluators for the Ford Foundation. We really were a part of the process for the site. We shared the field notes with the sites. Whenever the ethnographers would write a draft, the staff at the site would take a look at it. They would edit it, change things, and add things so that it was really a joint project. In fact, we all had to make a big adjustment because normally ethnographers work very independently. One of the interesting things was that the ethnographers sometimes are the most stable personnel in the organization.

Maureen Knighton When I came on board with Africa Exchange there was a lot of information the ethnographers helped provide to me and to those I brought when I came in. They were a really wonderful, objective third eye for us and helped support the continuity that we were trying to build on our own.

Judy Mitoma The idea of circulating information was part of our process. Sometimes it was just an internal circulation. Christine was very good in that she gave us a choice of keeping it internal or making it more public. Over the years, confidence built and now we’re going more public with information as is appropriate.

Convening to Share Experiences and Build Knowledge

Christine Vincent There was not a formal plan for convening all of these organizations at the outset of the initiative. We convened them once when they had all done their planning grants. To the credit of the people at the New England Foundation for the Arts, they came back to me and said, “This whole thing is about trying to improve practice and generate knowledge and information. It’s very clear that these folks need access to an overview and they need to have an ongoing conversation with each other

through this entire process.” That made all the sense in the world. Since then, there has been a regular series of convenings for those grantees about sharing the experiences of implementing, what had been planned, the war stories, and learning from each other about what it meant to try these sort of things.

Sam Miller There was always a little tension around sharing knowledge in a situation in which you are still hoping for resources from the funder. We created an environment in which people understood what their responsibility was. When there were difficulties we tried to either immediately address them or right after the meeting have a conference call with the principles and discuss what steps we would take to remedy it. The convenings became sort of a service to the knowledge building in the second phase.

Judy Mitoma I think the “through line” is about sharing information, for us to both have the discipline to identify what it is we’re learning and then be able to formulate it and articulate it to others. Some of those people have a lot of experience and I really appreciate hearing how they’ve tackled certain problems. In other areas I have more experience than they do. So I think like any learning community, there is a lot of respect and a desire to share information in a non-competitive way.

Christine Vincent They had accomplished a tremendous amount. When we got ready to do the second set of implementation grants, the groups were challenged to revise their programs based on what they had learned in the first three years, and they really began to look at the challenge of sustaining the best practices that had been identified.

Sam Miller I think the whole point here has been repetition builds best practice. The reason that such a deep long commitment was made to each site was so that they could do a project, reflect on the project, and do a project again.

Christine Vincent The grantees came up with a very effective process – a very effective idea – which is that they would meet periodically on one of the key issues that had emerged from the initiative, and they would hold a convening about that. It would be a convening of themselves, guest artists, and guest scholars for a two-day retreat. The results of this series of convenings are compiled in publications and have been a very important part of the dissemination and knowledge building process. The ethnographic documentation has woven this all together.

We’re coming up to the conclusion of the initiative in terms of formal grant activity. We have another set of convenings that’s going to happen, publications to come out. We are providing some final support to a number of the groups that have particular promise around institutionalizing what they have done as national programs. That way they can set up permanent internal funds to support this work, or take certain kinds of steps that will help insure that they will be able to continue to do this work as leaders in their field.

Maureen Knighton We really are a stronger organization in many ways. This allowed us to make connections that will sustain our work, and their work as well, for many years to come. We’re basing it on a lot of information and experience so it’s not just a shot in the dark. It really does have a significant chance of succeeding.

Judy Mitoma I really appreciate the trust that was given to me and to the others in this initiative. Now when I speak to people, I am able to have real experience behind me. It’s not hypothetical; it’s not theoretical. It is direct knowledge of what this process of art making is, and what the impact of art can be on people. We’ve learned how to create the most beneficial creative process and how to create trust. All these things we’ve learned over the years, we’ve learned by doing them. Now when we talk to others about it, we are talking with a feeling of confidence.

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