

Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation (CAST) Presents:

United States Department of Arts and Culture Design Lab

April 14th, 2015
11:30am – 6:30pm
Brandeis University
Various Locations

Introduction:

A design lab is a process for bringing together various constituencies related to a problem, issue or possibility to think in creative ways and to design structures, processes, or expressions that lead to a more just, peaceful, resilient, and vibrant communities. In the spring of 2015, the minor in CAST supported four design labs, one of which was in collaboration with the United States Department of Arts and Culture (USDAC). USDAC is a grassroots initiative that seeks to mobilize the power of the arts for social change. A description from their website:

“The U.S. Department of Arts and Culture is not a federally recognized agency, but *an act of collective imagination* fueled by all who believe that art and culture are among our most powerful and under-tapped resources for creating a more just, equitable, and vibrant world. “

The purpose of the design lab was to discuss potential models for USDAC campus chapters and to receive feedback from members of the “Introduction to Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation” (CAST 150b) class and other interested parties about what would be the most effective use of resources for setting up and maintaining campus chapters.

Additionally, one session of the design lab was dedicated to exploring how Imagining America might be involved in advancing USDAC’s mission and goals. Imagining America is “a consortium of universities and organizations dedicated to advancing the public and civic purposes of humanities, arts, and design.” (website)

The design lab consisted of four different sessions, described below. In attendance at the design lab were nine Brandeis faculty members, sixteen Brandeis undergraduate students, and four guests. This report summarizes the proceedings of the day, participants, key learnings, discoveries, ideas, recommendations, concerns, and questions that arose from the design lab.

Key Questions:

1. How much independence should the USDAC campus chapters have? In other words, how much should the work and short-term goals of the central USDAC office inform the work of campus chapters?
2. How much and what kind of support is needed from the central USDAC office to

- facilitate the creation and maintenance of campus chapters?
3. How do other national organizations with various chapters nurture leadership within those chapters and sustain community?

Explanation of CAST 150B:

The Introduction to Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation explores how to use art as a means in moving toward social change and reconciliation. The course explores several forms of creativity and expression including oral history, the visual arts, music, dance, theater, and storytelling. In studying these art forms, students learn how to build peace, mitigate conflicts, and establish social justice. In the class, students study works by authors ranging from Mary Marshall Clark, John Paul Lederach, and Salomon Lerner-Febrés to Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde. The class lays out a framework for the Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation minor, but it is also for students who study politics, peace and conflict studies, international and global studies, and the arts.

Explanation of CAST Minor:

The Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation minor encourages students to study the intersection of the arts and theory and practice of social change and peacebuilding. Students in the CAST minor will learn about how to impact change on society by thinking critically about the arts and developing their own projects that contribute to building peace. The CAST minor will challenge students to consider aesthetics and story when it comes to building peace by encouraging them to engage in written, visual, oral, and performing arts.

Explanation of Assignment/Roles Students Played:

Four students from the CAST 150b were chosen to assist this design lab. Shortly after being assigned, they met with Jax Gil '14, Brandeis alum and USDAC Sparkitect, to discuss the goals of USDAC and the purpose of the design lab. They were each assigned the task of researching two different non-profit organizations with missions similar to that of USDAC or that were structured as a central organization with campus chapters. These organizations were Jóvenes y Padres Unidos, Young People For (YP4), The Kefi Project, Girl Up, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Berkeley Student Co-Op, Student Divestment Network, Student Peace Alliance and the Student/Farmworker Alliance.

Their research was focused on the organizational structure of each non-profit, particularly whether they had local chapters and how these chapters were organized within their communities and within the national organization as a whole. They focused on questions such as “What does their leadership structure look like and how do they sustain community?” They each wrote individual research memos on their respective organizations with their findings. In preparation for the design lab day, the individual memos were compiled into one final research memo that included further analysis on the findings. The students also presented this information to the larger group during one of the sessions during the design lab.

Additionally, the students were tasked with keeping detailed notes of each session of the

design lab that were useful in creating this report.

Participants:

First Session (Potential for Faculty Involvement):

- Cynthia Cohen (Brandeis CAST Department Head, CAST 150b Professor)
- Julia Green '18 (Brandeis Undergraduate, documenter)
- Leann Heath (College Unbounded, Providence, Rhode Island)
- Adam Horowitz (USDAC, Chief Instigator)
- Jemesh Hunter '15 (Brandeis Undergraduate)
- Adrienne Krstansky (Brandeis Theatre Arts, Faculty)
- Jenn Largaespada '16 (CAST 150b Teaching Assistant)
- Marci McPhee (Brandeis Ethics Center, Associate Director)
- Azlin Perdomo (Brandeis Hispanic Studies, Faculty)
- Kelley Ready (Brandeis Heller School, Faculty)
- Anahi Russo Garrido (Brandeis Women and Gender Studies, Faculty)
- Faith Smith (Brandeis African and Afro-American Studies, Faculty)
- Aliza Sotsky '15 (Brandeis Undergraduate, documenter)
- Melissa Stimell (Brandeis Legal Studies and Social Justice and Social Policy, Faculty)
- Elaine Wong (Brandeis Office of Arts and Sciences, Senior Associate Dean)

Second session (Possible Models for Campus Chapters):

- Lisette Anzoategui (Brandeis Heller School, Graduate Student)
- Elizabeth Bradfield (Brandeis Poet-in-Residence)
- Cynthia Cohen
- Leann Heath
- Adam Horowitz
- Sophia (Prospective Brandeis Student)

Brandeis Undergraduates/CAST 150b students:

- Mauria Atzil '18
- Alex Bordona '18
- Marcello Brociner '18
- Sara Cárdenas '17 (Documenter)
- Kate Farrell '17
- Stacy Finley '15
- Rachel Geller '18
- Julia Green '18
- Rachel Kurland '18 (Documenter)
- Jenn Largaespada '16
- Ryan Millis '15
- LaShawn Simmons '18
- Jamie Semel '17

- Aliza Sotsky '15
- Maggie Ziegel '18

Third Session (Role of Imagining America):

- Mauria Atzil '18
- Alex Bordona '18
- Kevin Bott (Imagining America, Associate Director)
- Elizabeth Bradfield
- Sara Cárdenas '17 (Documenter)
- Cynthia Cohen
- Julia Green '18 (Documenter)
- Jamie Semel '17
- Aliza Sotsky '15
- Holly Zahn (Imagining America, Scholar).

Fourth Session (Debrief):

- Elizabeth Bradfield
- Sara Cárdenas '17 (Documenter)
- Cynthia Cohen
- Adam Horowitz
- Jenn Largaespada '16
- Aliza Sotsky '15 (Documenter)

Key Learnings:

At the end of the design lab we noticed a few ideas that were repeated throughout the day and that were acknowledged as important tensions for USDAC to consider going forward. One of these is the idea of decentralization. Should chapters be given their own power and be guided by the national chapter? Or, rather, should they work under the national chapter so as to give the national group more coherence? In other words, how much autonomy should be given to individual chapters and how much coordination? In the former, the groups might be more motivated to accomplish tasks because they will be the ones choosing their own tasks. Perhaps all chapters can participate in one or two national initiatives, but then have autonomy regarding other initiatives. In any case, USDAC should be able to provide resources and information to guide and support local chapters. In addition, it is important for the chapters to be goal oriented.

A point of tension that arose during the faculty session was the difficulty that faculty and staff experience when attempting to enter and participate in student spaces. They explained that they often feel unwanted and unwelcomed in student groups. This is partially due to differing schedules between faculty and students. The faculty present also shared that they do not want to overstep their boundaries or get in the way of their students' leadership abilities. This was interesting for the students to hear because they claimed that they came into college primarily seeking guidance and assistance from older professionals in their chosen fields. It became clear that if USDAC were to exist here there would need to be a predetermined decision about faculty and staff involvement. If faculty and staff are to be involved their role must be clear from the

beginning so they do not fear overstepping and the students do not feel unsupported. The benefits of faculty and staff involvement include continuity for the group as well as a potential for more resources and knowledge about how to reach out to working professionals. Suggestions were made for a space where students, staff, and faculty could meet to discuss ideas in a non-classroom dynamic setting. The goal would be a space where faculty and staff could support and empower students without overwhelming them.

The idea of USDAC internships was another way to maintain continuity and connection in college chapters. While there is a lot of energy and excitement on college campuses, there is also a lot of turnover. There was discussion about what the application forms would look like for people who wanted to participate in a USDAC college chapter and it became clear that a multi-year commitment is a necessity. The hope of internships is that they could continue their legacy of leadership with college chapters so no groups fall apart if one year has weaker leadership than other years. Applications could come from teams comprised of students (both undergraduate and graduate), staff, and faculty as well as people in the community, and, if relevant, nearby field offices.

During the session focused on potential campus chapter models, the question of ‘why here’ became very important. A couple of undergraduate students felt that it was unethical and insensitive to bring even more art to an already well endowed campus when there are people in nearby areas who do not have the same privileges. It seemed that having a chapter here that focused on fixing problems on campus would further entrench the campus in the “college bubble”. It was suggested that the chapters should consider being involved with the surrounding community. For example, at Brandeis some undergraduates expressed interest in bringing art to the community of Waltham. However, the goal of USDAC is to use art for social change so the chapters must remain socially conscious by working beyond the barriers of their chosen colleges.

The counter argument, however, was that there is a reason universities are a center for change. There is a level of energy and intelligence here that can accomplish a great deal. There are also problems here and the idea of going out and fixing some other community when we have not even fixed ourselves seems wrong. It was noted that some students (as well as faculty and staff) might not yet have the capacities to address community issues without causing harm. Additionally, colleges have many resources that do not need to be brought by USDAC. USDAC can harness the creative power of college students and the resources they already have to address issues that affect local communities as well as national concerns. A college chapter could also be used as an experiment; if it works here maybe it can work in another type of community. In addition, it was recognized that colleges and universities are sources of leadership for the growing arts/culture and social change movement.

One compromise that emerged from this debate was that the college chapters could be affiliated with a community field office. There are a few USDAC field offices already in existence and perhaps picking colleges near those would be a good starting point for college chapters. Additionally, the idea of starting chapters at different types of schools (community colleges, high schools, public universities and private universities) would be another way of testing the effects of a chapter on different types of environments.

One last idea that was mentioned is the importance of keeping the spirit of creativity going forward. Many potential names were tossed around for chapters (fault zones, satellites, awakening cells, etc.) and it became clear that USDAC must emit creativity even from its descriptions. The idea of each chapter naming itself was tossed around as well. ‘Fault Zone’ was particularly interesting because of its encouragement of failure. Whatever the chapters end up being, they must have a different attitude than does most of academia. They should be a safe space that encourages creativity over success and questions over accuracy.

Next Steps:

The next steps for USDAC are to think about and analyze the information provided in the design lab in order to start creating goals for the overall organization and how individual chapters can achieve those goals. One possible way to maintain the discussion among students about such topics would be sending students to the Imagining America Convention. After national goals are established it may be helpful to talk with other colleges or to focus power into establishing a chapter at Brandeis as a starting point due to its existing foundation for art and social transformation. We also discussed how strong and clear websites are influential, so adding more potential projects to the list on www.usdac.us could be helpful for students who want to start their own chapters. Adam emphasized that this is the start and there is no rush, so the next steps include thinking about the questions, ideas, and discussions outlined in this report.

References:

<http://usdac.us/>

<http://imaginingamerica.org/>