

Letter from England  
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The British initiatives Creative Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE UK) and Creative Partnerships were modeled in part on the Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education. CAPE's Executive Director, Arnold Aprill, was invited to visit those partnerships and to present at their national gathering. The following are notes from these visits.



As we work to understand the depths and range of the essential contributions of the arts to effective public education, CAPE has always depended on the kindness of strangers. Our contacts and exchanges with people working in other contexts, other cities and other countries has challenged us to rethink and expand our ideas about what we are doing in Chicago. This parallels CAPE's central practice of forming "mixed tables" (collaborative work between people representing differing points of view) in order to move forward innovative thinking and practice. This happens at the classroom level between teachers and artists and students, at the school level as we convene partners across schools, and at the national and international level as we exchange ideas across cities and cultures.

Early in the history of the Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education, I was asked, as Executive Director of CAPE, to present in London at a conference on the future of arts education. The CAPE concept of long-term teaching and learning partnerships between schools and arts organizations resonated with emerging ideas in the UK about creative education. I was asked to present to the London Arts Board and to educators in Leeds and Manchester. Inspired by CAPE's model, the London Education Arts Partnerships (LEAP) and the Creative Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE UK) [www.capeuk.org/wi01.htm](http://www.capeuk.org/wi01.htm) were formed. These new networks, stimulated by the idea of an international discussion about innovative partnership practice, convened a trans-Atlantic conference in which teachers and artists from Chicago and from the UK traveled to each other's countries and visited each other's classrooms, and then processed their collective observations:

<http://www.capeweb.org/exconferint.pdf>

The U.S. Embassy in London threw a party for the Chicago teachers and artists, in which they were honored by the mayors of the boroughs of London, and the UK teachers and artists were feted at what was then the Walnut room of Marshall Field's in downtown Chicago.

Over the years, there have been many contacts and exchanges between these two communities. An on-going relationship was developed between the Arts at the Center program of the Chicago Teachers' Center at Northeastern Illinois University and the Scottish Arts Council. Sylvia Dow, then director of arts education for the Scottish Arts Council, joined myself and Jackie Murphy from Arts at the Center in conducting a CAPE workshop in Paducah, Kentucky. Renowned Stanford-based researcher Shirley Brice

Heath began working with arts partnership programs in England, and met up with CAPE staff, teachers and artists during these exchanges. A rich network was formed.

CAPE researcher and curriculum consultant Gail Burnaford and I met arts education innovator Simon Spain one night in London. Simon was then directing the Kids' Own Publishing initiative in Ireland, and soon Gail and I were helping convene a national conference on arts education partnerships for the Irish Arts Council. <http://kidsown.ie/cape-symposium/>

Simon also introduced us to Martin Drury, the visionary founder of The Ark, a model children's cultural learning center in Dublin. Simon visited CAPE in Chicago, and joined CAPE teachers and artists in the Mississippi Delta as part of CAPE's Great Migration project. [www.capeweb.org/expgm.html](http://www.capeweb.org/expgm.html) His innovative work in integrating writing, design, and new technologies with young people caught the attention of the Australian Centre for the Moving Image [www.acmi.net.au](http://www.acmi.net.au) where he conducted cutting-edge workshops. He was then recruited by the city of Melbourne to form ArtPlay, a unique community arts center for children and families.

[www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/info.cfm?top=22&pg=1963](http://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/info.cfm?top=22&pg=1963)

Our contacts in the UK expanded to networks in Australia and in New Zealand.



Twelve years after our first international exchange with programs in the United Kingdom, I was asked back to the UK to address a national convening of arts education partnerships. England had committed to a multi-year, nation-wide initiative called "Creative Partnerships" in which external partners, mostly arts organizations, were partnered with schools to co-develop innovative approaches to teaching and learning that built creative thinking into education.

[www.creative-partnerships.com/](http://www.creative-partnerships.com/)

I was to share a stage, as a keynote speaker, with England's Minister of Culture, David Lammy. I had the opportunity to talk one-on-one with a variety of partnership programs from across England. Head teacher Annie Cornbleet reprised the excellent presentation she had shared at the UNESCO World Conference on Arts Education in Lisbon, making an incontrovertible case for the importance of the arts in educating the "excluded"- students who had been thrown out of other schools as being beyond the educational pale.

I visited seven British cities (London, Ashford, Sheffield, Leeds, Manchester, Margate, and Keele) that were involved with arts partnership work, and it was inspiring to see partnership programs in action that CAPE's work in Chicago had helped initiate. I had the uncanny impression of having been fast-forwarded to a future time in which CAPE's most successful practices had become widely disseminated and implemented. I had a glimpse of what our future could be, and it was good.

This visit gave me an opportunity to take an outsider's view of arts education partnership practice. Here are some characteristics that were highlighted for me by my observations of these partnerships-in-action:

**Principal as Educational Leader:** Arts Education Partnership programs are the most effective when principals (or as the British



tellingly call them, “head teachers”) see themselves primarily as the leaders of effective educational innovation rather than primarily as management and administration. This means principals, in order to be effective, need to be informed about and excited by educational ideas, encourage reasonable risk-taking among their faculty, encourage disciplined inquiry about effective teaching and learning, and support teacher initiative and leadership. I met a group of teachers who had studied Buddhist thought with their students by taking all the desks, books, and computers out of their classrooms, changing their rooms into Buddhist meditation centers for a week, and inviting Buddhist thinkers into the school to dialogue with students. Another school focused their arts partnership pilot project on the “invisible” children at their school, foregrounding quiet students as leaders of innovation and risk-taking. These silent children soon revealed themselves as people with a LOT to say. This school also experimented extensively with outdoor learning, in which students actively and independently explored the natural environment. Visionary leadership allowed teachers and artists new to collaborative work in schools to operate effectively together at a highly sophisticated level within a few month’s time.

**Rural, Suburban, Urban:** The work in small rural school districts looked remarkably similar to the work CAPE does in a large urban school district like Chicago. In other words, as important as local context is to effective education, there are principles and practices that transcend geography. This appears to be becoming increasingly true as all communities become increasingly multicultural, and communications systems become increasingly global. The discoveries made by individual arts education partnerships can have broad implications for the entire field of effective education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And we now have the technologies to make broad dissemination possible.



**Action Research:** CAPE UK, our sister organization in the UK, was engaged by Creative Partnerships to organize a national action research initiative, in which teachers and creative partners ask questions about their own practice, and systematically collect data from their practice to answer these inquiry questions. CAPE in the U.S. has committed to action research, and I was gratified to find our sister organization has independently made some of the same strategic choices as we have in Chicago. As a rule, British, Irish, and Australian print publications about their partnership work outstrips U.S. publications in their attention to design, quality of production, and challenging intellectual content.



Our colleagues across the oceans write a lot about their work, they take on complex ideas, and their documents are beautiful and beautifully produced. I was privileged to spend time with Pat Cochraine and Pete McGuigan from the CAPE UK staff. They have particular talents in bridging theoretical thinking with the practical work of public-private partnerships. It was a thrill to be

sitting in a CAPE office in another country.

**Contemporary Practice:** If we want to scaffold conceptual thinking through the arts, it makes sense to invite conceptual artists into the schools. One school, working with an installation artist, decided that they wanted to study the ducks living in the pond in the middle of their village. Though the artist secretly hoped that the students would be drawn to a



local archeological site she was personally interested in, the students insisted on studying their ducks. Working with their teachers and the artist, they baked haiku about the ducks out of letters made of bread, and fed them to the very ducks they had poeticized, in a project named “Eat my Words”. The entire village became invested in the project.

In a collaboration between Creative Partnerships Kent and the installation impresarios Artangel, young people in Margate worked with renowned photographer Wendy Ewald to create banners displayed throughout the city that documented complex responses to the thorny issues of migration and immigration. The Kent partnership has created its own beautiful, freestanding art gallery in Margate for exhibiting students’ conceptual work. I was astonished to see how quickly and enthusiastically these students were able to grab a hold of very abstract artistic approaches. They created miniature dioramas of the waterfront out of shells and flickering Christmas lights and construction paper, nestled inside ammunition boxes and magically revealed through the kind of peepholes usually reserved for observing strangers through doors. They experimented with structures for sending and receiving echoes back and forth across rivers. They were about to launch a project with the British master musician David Coulter and the French sound artist Jean-Jacques Palix. On a clear day in Margate, you can see Jean-Jacques’ homeland across the channel.



It was poignant staying at the Walpole Bay Hotel, with its rag-tag “museum” of 1930’s memorabilia, bathed in the amazing light that drew the great Turner to paint this seaside resort in its 1800’s heyday. I felt nostalgic for two different eras I had never experienced.



The departing director of Creative Partnerships Kent, Anna Cutler, was about to leave her position and begin her tenure as the Head of Education and Interpretation at the Tate Modern in London. I was able to meet with her and review the exceptional work that she had facilitated in the region. She also introduced me to her transition team. Partnerships

are beginning to sustain themselves beyond their initial leadership.

[www.creative-partnerships.com/Kent](http://www.creative-partnerships.com/Kent)

**Learner as Colleague:** Some of the most innovative work being done in arts education partnerships generates new dynamics between students, teachers, and artists. Students are no longer seen as potential arts practitioners bowing before adult masters, but as colleagues contributing their own thinking to full blown new work in partnership with adult artists. The acclaimed experimental British dancers the Cholmondeleys and the Featherstonehaughs developed an in-depth working relationship with Brockhill middle school, presenting new work created by students in one of their professional performance venues.



### **Of Pilots and Policy**

Creative Partnerships was created to support sustained co-planning between schools and creative practitioners in all disciplines, with the express intention of advancing national policies on education in an information age. Nationally commissioned research teams, viewing the program as a pilot project, have explicitly examined the initiative with a focus on its policy implications. It is no accident that my host for this trip, Joe Hallengarten, comes from a background in educational policy. The work of Creative Partnerships is taken with a level of seriousness by its national government that we have not yet seen in the United States, even though effective arts partnership programs in the U.S. successfully resolve many of the “intractable” educational problems policymakers seek to address- such as issues of student engagement, teacher retention, and the achievement gap. Increasingly, thinkers in the US are writing about the importance of creative education in forming a robust creative economy, but other countries appear to be having a much more intentional public discussion about moving educational thinking beyond manufacturing economy models. This visit to our colleagues “across the puddle” has powerfully clarified for me the centrality of practitioners’ voices in developing new practice, new research, and new policy, and has fortified my resolve in committing to our collective work.