Artists’ Letters to Students

by Amanda Dargan

I grew up in a small village in the state of Espirito Santo, Brazil, where there was not much to do as a small child but go to our one room school, tend to our crops and animals, and create adventures (some imagined and some real) while dreaming of far away places.

So begins *capoeira* artist Bom Jesus’s letter to the students he will teach for the next fourteen weeks. He goes on to describe how he began learning *capoeira* at age ten and what attracted him to it. He realized I could entertain people by walking long distances on my hands as fast as the other boys walk on their feet. I loved to fly through the air and to do back flips and somersaults. He describes years spent perfecting the skills and learning the philosophy and important life lessons that *capoeira* teaches. He closes by telling students what he expects them to learn: We will explore the basics of *capoeira* while developing our physical fitness, creativity, self-expression, and performance skills.

At City Lore, the non-profit organization in New York City where I work, we bring artists into public schools to work with students in long term (10 to 14 sessions) artist residencies. The artist’s letter is a valuable tool we use to introduce teaching artists to students and to help artists identify what they want their students to know and learn. Writing the letter encourages artists to think deeply about their practice as artists, as educators, as well as their responsibilities to their culture and their students.

Although City Lore works with both folk and traditional artists and artists with a fine arts background, we find that a key challenge for folk artists is how to teach their art in a way that respects the tradition and the cultural values it embodies. They struggle with how to teach students from diverse cultural backgrounds, whom they will see for only a short time. Before writing the letter, artists identify what they consider essential that their students know about their cultural tradition, their “non-negotiables”. For Guillermo Guerrero, a traditional musician from the Andes Mountain region of South America, it is essential that the students make their *antara* (a panpipe) with reeds he brings back from the region, because “the sound of the Andes is in those reeds.” For Puerto Rican *bomba* and *plena* dancer Julia Gutierrez-Rivera, it is the gesture of respect, the “salute,” that the dancer gives the lead drummer in the *bomba* ensemble as she begins and ends their “conversation.” She teaches her female dancers the traditional way to salute the drummer by lifting the edge of her skirt to her forehead as she bows, but she allows them to use their own nonverbal (“dancers communicate with their bodies, not words”) greetings. West African dancer Yahaya Kamate insists that each class end with a *doable*, a gesture of respect. As he accompanies students on the djembe drum, they place their hands over their hearts, reach for the sky, touch the floor, and turn around while saying, “Thank you heart. Thank you sky. Thank you heart. Thank you earth. Thank you everyone.” Yahaya says that his students may forget the dance steps but they’ll never forget the *doable*.

We also identify elements that artists are willing to sacrifice or adapt to the age and skills of their students and the constraints of time, setting, and duration of the residency. A key question is, “How can we convey the complexity of a cultural tradition and make it accessible for even very young students?” Mali Ni Srinivasan, an Indian Bharatanatyam dancer, realized very early that in school settings she must sacrifice an emphasis on technique. She described her non-negotiables as the opening and closing prayer to Mother Earth, which became a “greeting” to Mother Earth, “so as not to offend,” and dancing with bare feet. “I feel that this art form is about contacting the ground with your body. It does not work with shoes. So much of our tradition is that weight and attachment to earth, that grounded, rhythmic move-
ment...It’s also attached to this Mother Earth idea. We are planted here.”

We encourage artists to discuss the people and experiences that influenced their decision to become artists in their letters; the contexts where they learned and presented their art; and the cultural values their art embodies. Artists identify the skills, work habits, and values that their art teaches and how these have informed other areas of their lives. Then they incorporate this information into a letter to their students.

The letters become a tool artists use to design instruction that supports the practices and values they identify as essential. Nego Gato, a Brazilian capoeira artist whose artist statement inspired our artist’s letters, writes, “Capoeira teaches sensitivity, flexibility, coordination, stamina, and how to read people. We circle these words and phrases and discuss how to design instruction that supports these core values and skills. We may ask, “What do you mean by flexibility? Is it just flexible bodies or do you also mean flexible minds?” We can stretch and warm up muscles to build flexible bodies but how do we develop flexible minds? Many traditional arts, including Puerto Rican bomba and plena, require the skill of reading and anticipating a partner’s movements, so we gather ideas from other artists in the room about activities and strategies for teaching this skill.

In their letters, several artists wrote that their art form teaches “patience.” How can we teach patience? The artists’ responses reflect their experiences both as learners and teachers: we can model patience in our teaching, design activities that require patience, refrain from rescuing students when they lose their patience and offer strategies to help them push through frustration. Other artists describe the importance of learning from mistakes. We encourage them to use teachable moments to share examples of their own mistakes, what they learned from them, and artwork that grew from work they considered imperfect.

Our goal is to encourage artists to gather their memories and experiences and to identify their values and skills, then incorporate these into their letters and their teaching practice. This process helps artists design instruction that honors their tradition, reflects their core values, and provides rich learning experiences that students can connect to their own experiences and cultural traditions.

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**MEET YOUR CITY LORE ARTIST, FOLY KOLADE**

Hi, my name is Michael Kolade, but everyone calls me Foly. I am a visual artist and a musician. I express myself with textiles, paper, and drums. I grew up in southeastern Nigeria in a small town called Osogbo. Many people there are artists. Honestly, there isn’t one family in Osogbo that doesn’t have an artist. Once I knew I wanted to be an artist, my aunt, who was an artist, sustained my inspiration. She had an art gallery and international art school. I met artists from all over the world through her.

My art comes from my experience, my environment, and what I see. My paintings and my music reflect the life I had growing up—the hardship, the fun, the spirituality. There were many tragedies in my life, but also many fun times. You know what else motivates me—a sense of responsibility to my culture. I want to keep my traditions alive. Many parts of my traditional culture are dying and I feel it is my responsibility as an artist to maintain them. If I don’t, what will happen to them? They’re too wonderful to neglect and let wither away.

Being an artist requires discipline. I’m totally dedicated to my work. I respect it all. I learned this from a woman who took care of the river gods, the Osuns. She told a story about a man who threw his artwork in the garbage because he thought it wasn’t good enough. She said, “Never throw your art away. All your work is valuable. It’s not perfect; it’s not supposed to be. We always have room to grow and our work reminds us of our imperfection and encourages us to grow.” I try to have that philosophy about my life and my art.

I love working with young people because they’re so curious. They make me feel like I’m sharing something, like there’s an exchange. I teach to help people understand my culture and its people. I want people to see and understand the beauty of African cultures. There’s so much beauty in Africa. Art and music are powerful ways to communicate that beauty. I grab any opportunity to teach and I’m so happy to share what I know with you.