

## Review: *Make Arts for a Better Life-A Guide for Working with Communities*

Brian Schrag & Kathleen J. Van Buren  
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In this comprehensive guide, Brian Schrag and Kathleen J. Van Buren present a seven-step methodological framework designed to help “spark artistic creativity that feeds into better lives for people” (12) and invite readers to “think of the steps as a reliable, solid framework you can refer to” (26). They draw on their scholarly and practical expertise in ethnomusicology and additional contributions from folklore, performance studies, anthropology, communications studies, and community development to inform their approach. The proposed *Make Arts* process details a bottom-up approach to researching a community and its arts; identifying community goals and aspirations; designing, managing and evaluating artistic outputs or events; and engaging in plans to embed arts activity in future community life.

The overall aim of the volume is “to stir up creativity in local forms that meet community goals” (58). The focus, throughout, is on collaboration, facilitation, understanding, trust, respect, dialogue, and communication as intrinsic to the *Make Arts* process. Schrag and Van Buren suggest that, while the arts cannot solve local and global problems, they can and are making a difference to communities worldwide (see Veblen et al. 2013; Bartleet & Higgins 2018). However, they explain that, in spite of a growing body of evidence for the benefits of “intentional artistic creativity in community well-being [...] best practices for arts-influenced community development remain widely unknown and incompletely applied” (ix). Their response, therefore, is “to provide a resource that can consider a wide range of contexts and further explore ethical and practical issues involved in developing community arts initiatives” (ix-xi). The authors consider three categories of potential community goals: identity and sustainability, health and well-being, and human rights, acknowledging that these are “sometimes contested terms” (17). The authors state that *Make Arts* is for arts advocates – for “anyone who wants to help communities draw on their artistic resources to improve their lives” (xii). To that end they focus on three target categories: researchers, project leaders, and educators.

The book is divided into three distinct sections. The opening section outlines the rationale for writing *Make Arts*, the historical context of arts interventions, and the need to expand knowledge of the role of the arts in evidence-based research that demonstrates the utility of the arts in these contexts. The authors explore the concepts of “a better life” (4), and “what is good”? (7). The authors clearly outline their own positions, definitions and perspectives in relation to each of the concepts discussed. The main section presents seven steps aimed at helping individuals and communities to learn about, and build on, their own artistic strengths and to use local arts to achieve self-identified practical goals. The seven steps are: meet a community and its arts; specify goals for a better life; connect goals to genres; analyze genres and events; spark creativity; improve results; and celebrate and integrate for continuity. The seven steps provide comprehensive and detailed guidance on how to work through various stages involved in facilitating a collaborative arts project. A central argument throughout is that “people are at the core of artistic communication” (200). The authors persuasively argue that while there may be many factors involved in achieving community goals communities can benefit from well-researched, well-planned arts projects. The closing section, numbered 1 to 9, contains a substantial bibliography and glossary of terms. This section also provides a really useful overview of the main features of the Guide, with suggestions for educators, project leaders and researchers, and quick reference indexes to various sections of the book.

The language throughout the book is clear and accessible. Case studies, practical activities, and supplementary resources are presented as “effective aids for research, teaching and community work” (xiv), for example, the arts can help with literacy problems or promote awareness about particular issues. A particular strength of the book is its honesty and the authors acknowledge that the arts alone cannot solve problems. They acknowledge that projects can fail but stress the im-

portance of learning from failure. They highlight the importance of research and evaluation, not just as a means to be accountable to funders (see Crossick & Kaszynska 2016), but to build on accumulated knowledge and experience to help communities to help themselves in the future, and to give something back to community members. They emphasize that arts research and subsequent artistic projects do not involve a quick or easy process; the arts communicate in complex ways; communities are complicated and varied; and dialogue, ethical considerations, and collaboration are of the utmost importance in this type of work. They encourage people to set realistic goals, to be aware of constraints, to think creatively about how to overcome challenges, to learn from past projects, and to learn from social contexts.

Ultimately, Schrag and Van Buren generously share an accumulation of expert knowledge gleaned from their own scholarly research, fieldwork, and practical experience. They support this expert knowledge with additional library and web resources, contributions from other experts, and practical activities. The key idea, throughout, is that researchers, project leaders, educators, and others should learn from communities, communities should choose their own goals, arts initiatives should be designed in collaboration with local artists and community members, and, above all, the arts can make a difference in people's lives and have a lasting effect. The authors want "the act of creating to endure so that community can continue to make arts that help its members" (15). This book would be useful to ethnomusicologists, community musicians, community arts facilitators, educators, arts administrators, or voluntary arts groups. It would also be useful to artist/researchers engaged in arts practice research where design and analysis of an artefact or performance, alongside a written thesis, evidences a research inquiry (Nelson 2013; Smith & Dean 2009). The level of detail makes this an invaluable resource for anyone engaged in individual or collaborative arts practice.

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## References

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