

Volunteering for democracy in Nepali extracurricular music education

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Abstract:

With music lessons absent from many school curricula, and private tuition often out of financial reach for many families, many Nepali children and young people access music education through projects led by voluntary teachers.

In this research report, I communicate the findings of a case study on Nepali music teachers volunteering their time and skills to work in extracurricular music programs. For the purpose of this study, I understood these teachers' work as a form of activism. Teaching artists discussed in this study volunteer their time to teach music to the children. In collaboration with the school, project described in this study also negotiated free tuition to the students that are in need. Music thus served as a bridge creating opportunities for children not just to learn music but have access on education.

The data of this study consists of teacher interviews. The reflections of the researcher, who has been also part of the project, are included in the data as well. The data revealed various challenges along with possible solutions that the teachers experienced. Several things affected on the motivation of the teachers: instrument unavailability and challenges in making short and long term plans were some of the main problems that stood out from the interviews. Almost none of the teachers is formally trained, but started to work after having experience as a musician. They felt discouraged, while lessons would not give the desired results. However these issues encouraged teachers apply new approaches to the music lessons. The unavailability of instruments supported teacher's creativity. Also the approaches established during the process, gave more room for children to work with each other. In other words, when teachers faced unexpected situations, it drove them to learn something new themselves.

The study has given direction towards how teachers belief in teaching could foster the wellbeing of self and make an impact on the society outside classrooms. The profession of a teacher is a commitment and teacher training is a necessity in the majority world like ours. Still, very few consider teaching as a profession. The values that teaching produces is neglected as understanding of the core values of teaching is still greatly lacking. Applying creative approaches to make sense of teaching is a key to professionalism. Therefore, training of teachers who are capable of working creatively in various learning environments is crucial considering the impact that they make in the society.

Keywords: Activism, Democracy, Extracurricular music education, Nepal, Volunteering

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This research report outlines the justifications that Nepali music teachers give for volunteering their time as part of extracurricular music projects. The research focuses upon one programme initiated and run by volunteer music teachers in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal. I became interested in this topic as the project is one where I myself have been volunteering, hoping to provide education for children who represent marginalized backgrounds in Nepal. As a researcher, I was interested in the potentials of this project to support democracy and social justice, but also potential problems and challenges. In this report, I understand teachers volunteering their time and efforts as a form of activism for democracy. The project being a collective effort of like minded people working towards the benefits for the children in need. The project serves as platform for the teachers and responsible personnel to create opportunities for children to obtain educational opportunity. Thus creating democracy in education through participation of individuals through activism.

Through aiming towards democracy in this music education programme, the volunteer teachers are also aiming towards social justice in broader society. Democracy here, does not only mean the understanding of it being the power that have their standard set but knowing it as a voice which changes according to the demands and change that the society needs for the betterment of individual living in it. Talking about betterment of individuals, the basic necessity such as shelter, health and education are the must and these are prior beside all others. Here i would further more add democracy as right of every child to get education for free. There being many students in the classroom, learning to cooperate within the group, respect, communication and bonding as a team are basic things that could be worked on and nurtured while teaching in these contexts. Education could be interpreted as practical use of it in life which has far more importance than to just to get a job. As mostly all of the elements used in music making are also the elements that a person basically needs to live and contribute to the society. The process if well nurtured, worked and facilitated, students will create music which along with other regards like making a better society will also be another aspect that will be develop. This research, is thus asking: why do music teachers volunteer their time and skills, and how do the underlying values and beliefs guide and shape their teaching?

1.1 Context

Music is part of extra curricular program in most of the schools in Nepal. Extra curricular studies is pursued in addition to the normal course of study. It is not mandatory for the schools to have music in their curriculum. Depending on various factors like salary for the teacher, music classroom, musical instruments, some schools offer extracurricular activities and some do not. Still mostly all of the schools have parents day, where the children have musical performance for their parents. It is in this time of the year when music is crucially looked at, if the students perform well or not. Meaning that children should sing loud and clear, music should sound nice in order to make parents happy. This is mostly the purpose and goal for the school administration in having music in schools. This might not only be the objective to have music education in school, there could be more that could be accomplished through it. Volunteering for education by the music teachers could also be an example that music education might bring. With this, many teachers in Nepal volunteer their time and expertise as part of extracurricular music education.

1.2 L.S.L

The extracurricular project that serves as the focus of this study is called L.S.L(pseudonym) (education with the help of music). This project was established by a group of like minded individuals with shared interest, vision and goal to promote free education for children and young people in Kathmandu. It started in August of 2016. We, in a team of four have been volunteering as music tutors at V.A.K (pseudonym) school in Kathmandu. Part of our work there involves in negotiating with the school to provide free tuition to few students. To promote the idea of providing free education to many as possible we are trying and working so that we can reach out to more inside and outside Kathmandu. The negotiation with the school has made us realize and trust that these could also be worked out as sharing the expertise to provide education to those children in need.

Many of the session in music class at V.A.K, involves peer learning and teaching. As there are many students in the same class from four different grades, it is easy and also challenging to conduct the classes there. Regardless of the age in the same class, we work on creating space providing students their freedom to be expressive and confident maintaining the fine line where the balance is necessary as teacher and student relationship in order to make learning happening, team building attributes in children, emphasizing more on collective collaboration within children from different age groups at V.A.K school.

Chapter 2: Music Education activism for Social Justice - a literature review

The involvement and advocacy thriving certain adjustment to system could lead to activism. The will to take action seeing those needs might be clear and directed but the broad view of transformation could be exhausting or too ambitious. This could take a lot of effort and will. But if we look at our context, there is a demand where education inequality and lack of educational opportunity in the “third world” stand as perplexing, complex and difficult problem (Scrase 1997, p.11). Creating occasions that could amend tweaking bits that could help create educational opportunity which stands as a perplexing, complex problems. Educational inequality could also rely on different problems like income, awareness, priority, geography etc. Based on many of these problems, educational opportunity is still scarce in different parts of our country. Looking at the project that is based in Kathmandu, capital city of Nepal, where there are number of schools, institution and training programs, it necessarily does not satisfy and justify social justice in education (Young, 1990, p.193). Social justice could be related with equality in society. This meaning only providing such infrastructure without proper policy cannot fulfill the requirements that the marginal society needs to better their living standards, if there exists the lack of opportunity to participate in society’s major institution says Young, (1990, p.193). If we think problem from not being able to participate in such institution might limit the growth towards overcoming such problems in the present day need for development, activism that could help in giving access to basic necessity for every individual in need could improve their living standard working towards social justice.

This requires activism in education which could be “to get a group of like minded people together which could be said to be a ‘big picture’ group” (Sachs, 2003, p. 15). Then the inner need for activism in education for individuals gets a platform to brainstorm their ideas together. “Developing strategies and tactics together it is then about building relationships through partnerships, coalitions and alliances. Partnerships between various constituencies are usually based on mutual self-interest” (Sachs, 2003, p.17). In this occasion the partnership and mutual understanding with the school has lead this project towards the movement. Then the “goal is to bring together diverse groups of people with a common goal of initiating change.” (ibid.)

Then the classroom in this context creates opportunities for teachers to include students to listen “to allow them to enter our curriculum with us as agents of change”. Students "are not in our classes only to learn musical skills or established traditions from us; they are in our classes to shape musical traditions and social traditions that live and breathe and transform the world in which we live." (Allsup & Shieh 2012, p. 50). “They are able to motivate and inspire each other, test ideas, debate strategies and negotiate shared meanings about the various activist projects in which they are involved” (Sachs, 2003, p. 12). This does not always guarantee that the chosen

way of actions will lead to social justice what the music education in the school arch towards but the activist that strongly believes in their action is a firm grip to hold on to.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

Being in the music profession and not limiting it for just to play music but also seeing its benefits and looking at different dimensions to reach out to help and expand the limitations of many existing social constructs, has brought this project into existence. The teaching artists who are the focus of this study have endeavoured to find new ways to avoid excluding students who cannot afford music education. In this sense, the work of these teaching artists is understood not as social justice 'in thought only', but as "engaging with reflexive action towards social change, in contexts and communities relevant to education and beyond, thus creating new sites for learning and participation" (Montaño, López-Torres, De Lissovoy, Pacheco & Stillman, 2002). Even though there are many schools in Nepal who provides free tuition to students depending on the school's policy for it, this project also aims towards providing free tuition to the needy students. Although this project has been initiated by the teachers who do not belong to school as the inner core. Understanding activism in general term that "relates to the production of knowledge, policy, and pedagogical practices through active engagements with, and for, social groups that are marginalized by society" (Laes, 2017). Music is incorporated in school curriculum as an extracurricular activities where teachers teach music to school students. It is also same in our case, only the thing that is different is we teach in a team of four making the class more of a student centered as well as working in building more team work in the students, making more effort on collaborative work within the children themselves.

"This draws attention strongly not only towards the conjunction of pedagogical practice and political thought, but also to the production of knowledge as activist scholars through active engagements with and for the progression of social movements" (Sudbury & Okazawa-Rey, 2009, p. 3). Since the availability of instruments in the school is minimum, the teaching artists participating in this study have designed the lessons in such a way that students could understand music using body and to create music using different tools that are included in the lessons. Music educators that want to "apply democratic procedures need constantly invent new ways of co-operation and continue to search for meaning in relation to the experience of the students and to the educational situations and contexts" (Väkevä & Westerlund, 2007). Most of the activities that are conducted focuses in working in groups, learning to understand the power of group in music making via problem solving, respecting each other's decision and creating space for each others. To which in many of the activities conducted, the students are not only acquiring skills to play or create music, but if we look at the broader perspective, they are learning to work and cope with others in the class making it a habit to bring those changes in their society inside and outside of school. The attributes of learning in these sorts of approaches could enhance their growth as responsible and aware individuals. This also means the existing old style of teaching

methodologies might not work and would better work when remodelled according to the current situational needs.

Chapter 4: Methods

4.1 Research Aim and Questions

The overall aim of this research study was to investigate why music teachers working in the L.S.L project volunteer their time and skills as part of an extracurricular music programme at a local school V.A.K in Kathmandu.

Two research questions guided the study in order to answer this aim. These were:

1. Why do music teachers volunteer in this music programme?
2. How do these volunteer music teachers' values and beliefs shape their teaching methods?

4.2 Qualitative Research

For this research study, I chose the qualitative case study method as it seeks to provide the in depth analysis of the teaching methods of the teachers involved and the detail of interaction with its context (Stake, 1995). The purpose of the study seeks to look for insights, problems, demands of the teachers where the project itself being new creating challenges for the teacher to keep up with the arising problem in the process. Even though the challenges and problems remains but due to involvement of two teachers in the same class helps via supporting each other to keep up with the challenges in the class. Each class is conducted in groups where the teacher might sometime face different problems like not being able to observe the whole class, sometimes being carried away etc. Being two teachers in many of the similar situation, the task is much easier to carry out.

4.3 Data Collection

In this study I interviewed 3 of the teachers, and included my own reflections, as volunteers working in the L.S.L project in Kathmandu. The teachers involved have been playing music together and known each other for more than a decade. It was our joint interest to contribute as a volunteer teacher for the program. Before this project we had been teaching music and with the experience we have structured and initiated the project.

Since having similar vision and the goal is somewhat seen for the project the interview that I will conduct will mostly be semi structured. Since we know each other very well the interviews were quite casual. Since everyone of us are involved in the process, the interview was more of a discussion and experience sharing rather than question directed. Although there are directions which were lead by questions (See Appendix A) it mostly went with the flow due to which each sessions of interviews sometimes have been longer than expected. I conducted 3 interviews. All of the participants will be kept anonymous and they have the right to discontinue the session at any time if they do not feel like being a part of it. I audio recorded all the interview after getting the permission from each participant and then translated it into english. The interview conducted was in mixed languages, both Nepali and English, as we mostly use mixed language to communicate on a regular basis. Therefore, using this approach made it easier to understand and communicate without being too artificial.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

Research participants

As I am in this research too, I introduce myself in section 4.5 of this research report. The other research participants are introduced below.

Majee:

Majee is a male Bass player in his mid 30s. He has experience in composing, arranging, recording, performing.

Bale:

Bale is a male Piano player in his mid 30s. He has has the experience of performing, session playing and piano teaching.

Rume:

Rume is a male Bass player in his late 20s. He has had experience in composing, session playing, performing etc. He has also been teaching Bass for a very long period of time.

4.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke 2006) whereby researchers identified, analyzed and reported thematic patterns within the data. In interpreting 'various aspects of the research topic' (p. 79). The themes that were identified through this research study were:

1. Short-term plans and goals
2. Resource challenges
3. Sustainability

4.5 Researcher Position

We as humans have used conversation as a central tool to obtain knowledge from others (Brinkmann, 2013, p.15), playing music together for a very long time we have established the communicative bond among each other. I myself am a part of this project and for this study I will also include my own experiences and reflections.

I have been involved in this particular music education project since the beginning. I am one of the volunteer teachers that have both designed and implemented the project. It has been more than a year since we started the project at this school. I took Guitar as a major and Vocal a minor at Nepal Sangeet Vidhyalaya. From the knowledge gathered I started working as a Teacher Assistant for Western Vocal faculty there.

At the project L.S.L It was more of a negotiation with the school that directs towards creating opportunity for the students to get free education through the exchange of the expertise. This opportunity has made us realize how music education which as an extracurricular program at schools could benefit many students that are in need of free education. The sole purpose and the aim of the project is to help create and develop these sorts of negotiation that musicians could create to promote education or any other possible areas that could benefit others.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

All information gathered during the interviews and reflection in this research is reported using pseudonyms and is kept confidential. All participants were sent an informative email for the interview. The email mentioned about the research study that was being conducted, time and place where the interview will take place. All participants were involved voluntarily.

Chapter 5: Findings

5.1 Short term planning and goals:

In the interview when participants were asked how do we believe that our approach make sure that we are motivating each and every student, making sure that no one is left out or demotivated, Majee said,

I do not say we are 100% correct to the approaches that we are taking but I can least say is we are trying our best to come up with the solution in our class. We also look at elements like creativity in our subject which is vast and also I think it does not have standards that is measurable. But being able to look at every individual and see if he/she is trying to work hard on that we should be able to zoom in to those situation and try to enhance it. Also looking at the progress till now, I do not give myself 100 score and also to the students, but I think the process itself is time consuming and taking a shape. (Majee)

Bale added to these ideas,

The way of approaching to students giving negative comments is a big no. There are many other ways to approach to students that sends positive message. (Bale)

He shared one of his experience that he witnessed in one of the workshops that he attended. He later came to know from the experience of the participants those who attended the workshop who were given negative criticism. Due to such approach they did not want to attend the other following workshop,

These sorts of presenting yourself could be not so rewarding and misleading and misunderstood by the students. (Bale)

This made me as a researcher, and participant in the project wonder how we deal with the situations where some students lack interest and some are enthusiast about the class. Bale explained that our response to such situations had changed over time,

We have faced similar kind of situations and we would panic in the beginning. For us, we have been teaching but in different context than school context. In most of the times being observant and critical has helped us a lot in these kinds of situations. This has helped to figure out whether or not individuals is grasping or lacking behind. In those situations I have asked students to work with other students who is not following or is

having hard time to grasp things. Then I observe and be present in the situation to facilitate with what would be other ideal tools then. (Bale)

In my teaching contexts I have also established these kind of approaches prominent. Creating opportunities for students to co work and help each others in the class. Though they choose their favorite peers most of the times, I ask them to change the team. This has also brought tension within themselves. But this is ongoing and being very observant in these situation it has helped me and them to work closely with each other helping each others. Considering this approach has helped influence the least interested individual in making the pace. Looking at the psychology of children, they are very competitive yet due to which they learn a lot from each other which could be less achieved from teacher student relationship. Their friendship works as teacher student relationship in this instance.

In this project two of the participants teach grade 1 till 3, where the other two participants teach grade 4 till 7. I asked the participants whether the age of the students makes any difference in how they teach. Majee responded,

We are very flexible in our class. Even though in many circumstances lessons does not go according to the plan, but we try to pave our way through to make the lessons fruitful. (Majee)

Further Bale adds,

it is even hard sometime for me to read the psychology of my daughter. Most of the times I find myself confused at what my daughter is actually trying to convey. Upon holding back and asking her again many times then it is able for me to make sense to what she is trying to say. In many of the cases in the school is similar. We think they are intellectually sound but bit more hyper than we are. We are still learning and trying to improve out our approach that we apply. (Bale).

In the conversation Majee suddenly remembers one incident and shares his experience regarding how teachers reflection on the action is necessary that might help students to learn instead get more worse with the experience he had in the past. He says,

There was one student who dropped out from a government school and admitted to the same school where we are doing our project. He was an average student and had inherited the behaviour from previous school. Most of the students did not like him. He dressed up roughly, did not want to attend the class. Due to most of his habits, teachers also confronted him in the same manner. After about a year he again dropped out from the school. (Majee)

Looking at this incident the two teachers reflected on how important the teacher's role in these sort of situation. What could be improved as teachers when dealing with every sort of students that are present in the class. The mentioned example could also be a point of departure on how planning a goal for each class should be focused. All these reflected experience had made participants realize the important role of writing the plan for the classes. Which not only helps teacher but to keep record of the goal that we want to achieve from the project. Rume here adds,

I would not say a well structured plan but if we write down reflection about every class and document each session it will be very helpful for us to improve our way of approach to teach. (Rume)

5.2 Resource challenges

Despite the challenges regarding the resources in the school the participants have experienced both benefits of not having instruments in the class at the beginning and also a problem in later stages. Bale explains,

We understand that there is the problem relating to the instrument availability in the school, but it is not always the case for the students. Scarcity of instrument availability at the school sometimes is a problem while teaching for the teachers, and students sometimes are very keen to play the instruments. It does not always necessarily mean the students have to understand the situation. To overcome this situation we had started developing our approach without using instruments. We teach music mostly without using instruments. If we look from different dimension this has helped us explore our body more as an instrument in most of our lessons in our class enabling us to enhance and focus more on the body and many things that it is possible for us to explore music using our bodies. (Bale)

In this way, if we look at the positive attributes of unavailability of instruments in the classroom, it certainly has enhanced our approach to teaching music being more focused on body music making. If we assume we had instruments from the beginning of our sessions there would be a chaotic environment in the classroom as there are number of students in the class and mostly all of them at their beginner stage for playing an instrument. All of them holding the instruments and playing altogether at once. Though we would have adapted according to the situation, but the case is different. Learning how using our body could enhance the understanding of pulse, how it could be used to produce sound, enhancing group work, establishing team bonding. Bale expanded upon this idea,

Even though the beginning of the sessions without instrument were fruitful but he stresses out the importance of introduction of instruments in the later years. I sometimes find hard to proceed the class without instruments. (Bale)

5.3 Sustainability

Regarding the sustainability of the project, Majee raised the question,

How could we balance our economical situation? To which music education as a subject is less prioritized, we will face many arising problems due to this. If we look at this particular project, we are working as volunteer for this institution, but for the financial stability we should continue working with our one day session at different institution. Even if we do not get financial support to work on our operating cost we will not back ourselves up. But this will not guarantee and motivate us always if we always run out of money to conduct these sessions. In order to keep this project running, we should continue conducting our one day session to different community, organization, corporate houses etc that we are doing.

Chapter 6: Discussion

Music education in its infancy and received exposure mostly around Kathmandu, the project has a direction towards bringing certain tweaks and changes in education system in a school by the activist teachers. Believing in our expertise as musicians, we are able to negotiate free tuition to students, which in this case has shown positive signs towards the direction that the project seeks for. Experiences from the interview shows that participants despite not having the training to teach, there is a common realization that the action of the teacher while teaching is crucial. Students learning to work, respect and create together with each others could be understood as a big contribution and role of the teacher that they can produce. Figuring out different ways to teach with this mindset has many difficulties making it impossible sometimes to see the result in the same class. There are times when we have felt if this is not the way to bring things together. There are many instances where we have had the dilemma, whether the approach is taking shape that we have seen. Bringing the whole class together as a community. But this could also mean, we are learning in the process where there is success and also failures.

Across the globe, educational success now has come to mean employment success. Education has come to mean jobs and careers (Scrase. 1997. p. 12). Though I do not agree to the approach that has been mentioned and is applied, but if schools are the system to go through at the initial stages, every individual has the right to get the opportunity to go to school regardless of financial issues or other problems. But if the mentioned approach is applied it would seem that we are short-changing our children and youth, playing a kind of charade in which we are telling them and compelling them to “get an education” when what we are in fact doing is, fundamentally, schooling and training them. At this point, reflecting back from the interviews, the way that the music classes being conducted at this project opposes to the thoughts mentioned.

As Bale mentioned about the co working habits which he mostly emphasizes in the class also signifies that the classes are not only focused towards producing subject oriented marks rather making class more of a team building arena where all could work more and more on team building attributes along with individual centered approach. If we look at the broader sense the habit of collaborative working from childhood which our generation mostly missed while we were in our school makes the habit of solving problems collaboratively. The action of the teacher in this means would be to facilitate and improve to their approaches that would enhance the way of teaching and make it more rewarding for the students and for the teachers in the future according to Bale. As Majee stated due to the lack of teacher training, many of the approaches while teaching puts him in a dilemma. Due to this he stresses more on how written plan for the classes would help enhance the teaching methodology that would provide more space for creativity for both of us. The bigger picture of volunteering for a change comes with many tiny bits and pieces that should come together before making the project a success.

Looking at the project and its goal, the teacher have knowingly or unknowingly produced reasoning to create opportunity for the students to learn music. On the other hand the project also has been able to make education accessible to those in needs. Also to create such opportunities for students, respective personnel should be equally interested and willing to make these kinds of negotiations positive. In this case it has been successful, making volunteering in this instance meaningful. This signifies that there is an urge for professionals to look from different dimension resulting in producing little efforts and actions that the majority world like our needs. There is a call for individuals to produce efforts in “knowledge, policy and pedagogical practices for the active engagements for the social groups that are marginalised by the society” (Laes, 2017). The project could be an example that makes a step forward producing opportunities of education for those in need.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This study has looked at the experiences of the teachers involved in working at this project. There has been increased emphasis on the approach of the teaching methodologies by the teachers involved in this project. Thereby improving the approach used by the teacher as we continually reflected on our ideas throughout the study. This study has also been the means for all of us to know and share each other’s ideas more and helped us to explore more on the subject.

The first aim of this research was why would teacher volunteer in this particular project and secondly how would these beliefs and values shape in their teaching methods. Since the project is a collaborative effort made by the teacher themselves, the outcome is still ongoing. The efforts has made the volunteering in this project create opportunity to both learn music and produce free tuition to children in need. Volunteering has created the balance between the expertise sharing and right to education for children. This has brought the existence and willingness of the teacher produce such opportunity in the volunteering program. Despite challenges relating to resources availability, the teaching methodology in this sense has opened up different scenario and compelled teachers to find new approaches to the class that is conducted. Also looking at the class, involving all the children in the same class without instruments is also a challenge but looking at the brighter side the approach to make music together using different resources that we have around. This has also opened up looking for different approaches to understand music and create music. In this regards, the importance of team building attributes are developed in the children when working together to create desired sounds that our body could produce. This sense has many attributes to look at. As mentioned not all the desired results are seen on the same day. But the teaching approaches that have been adapted is contributing to building co working habits in children. Taking back from the experiences from the interview, the approaches that has been remodelled with the experience from the self reflections could be used replacing many old school teaching styles. More on the practicality level rather than marks oriented approaches.

The study has also given direction towards how teachers beliefs towards teaching their students could foster the wellbeing of self and the society outside. The profession of a teacher is a big commitment and necessary in the majority world like ours. Although many schools have good teachers but not most has it. Very few individual take teaching as a profession. It is neglected, meaning the importance is still not admired making it far from understanding its core values. Schools in this regard should be strict admiring the hardships and the values that teaching and teacher could produce at the same time the training of the teachers is seen crucial and warrants further attention.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Can you explain who you are?

What do you do in the project?

What makes you happy in the project?

What have been the problems with teaching in the project?

There might be problems related with teaching/ project that concerns you. Could we identify those problems?

What could be done in order to overcome such problems?

How has ways of teaching music changed for you as a teacher where no instruments are used?

Could we also see our profession as a teaching artists that could produce opportunities that could benefit people?

Are there possibilities if we broaden our thinking and create such opportunities on small scale?

What methods and approaches could be applied to achieve such opportunities as teaching artists?