

ARTICLES

Social Circus: Developing Structures for Program Efficacy in the United States

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This short piece aims to provide context about the unique situation of social circus in the United States and the ongoing work of the US-based 501 (c) 3 not-for-profit American Youth Circus Organization (AYCO). In August 2014 Cirque du Soleil called a meeting of select AYCO members with whom it had “partnerships” (Guilford 2014). At the time, I was two years into my service as Executive Director of AYCO, a twenty-year-old nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting the participation of youth in circus arts and supporting circus educators in the US. AYCO and Cirque du Soleil have had a strong relationship since AYCO’s founding in 1998, when Cirque du Soleil staff member Gil Favreau attended the planning retreat that led to the founding of AYCO and aided the organization in starting up its operations. The 2014 meeting, held at the Cirque du Soleil headquarters in Montreal, was designed to address the current state of social circus in the United States. Cirque du Soleil asked, “What must happen to make social circus a prominent recognized practice in the U.S.?” (Guilford 2014). Social circus was healthy but stagnant in the US at that time, and Cirque du Soleil was involved in numerous projects around the world that revealed social circus programs could grow their impact in significant ways by partnering with governments, corporations, and educational systems (Guilford 2014). The group that gathered was asked to determine if they saw room for growth and, if yes, how they might do so.

This produced our core question: what kind of action in the circus sector will enable social circus growth within the unique United States context? It is important to note that circus in the US does not inhabit a relative position of heightened cultural capital in the way that it does in other parts of the world. The deep cultural imprint of the golden age of the traditional circus is very present. With all due respect to traditional circus and circus history, assumptions about what circus is and can be among the public often present barriers to innovation—artistically, educationally, and socially. Although attitudes are changing slowly, circus’s widespread reputation remains that of family entertainment, with high-risk activity not meant for participation.

Sitting around the table at the Cirque du Soleil headquarters that day in 2014 were representatives from over a dozen organizations that self-identified as doing social circus, including organizations such as Circus Harmony, CircEsteem, Circus Juventas, and Prescott Circus Theatre. Based on my knowledge of the participants, the majority of the participating organizations were at least ten years old and had sustained consistent and powerful programming during their lifespan without the capacity to increase their impact in a significant or scalable way. I could tell that what unified the group was their shared identification that they all did social circus, and an agreement that, yes, they wanted to grow social circus’s impact in the US. However, there was a palpable dissonance in the room. Not everyone believed that the others were indeed doing *social circus*. Some defined social

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circus as providing financial aid for circus training whether or not those served were determined to be “at-risk,” while others held strict criteria that program outcomes be evaluated or that programs serve specifically “at-risk” youth. The lack of unified vision about what social circus is created a clear barrier in the midst of a call to action for growth in the sector.

The product of the fateful meeting was a clear call to action for AYCO to take the lead on mobilizing the growth of social circus in the US via what was named the Social Circus Initiative. The initiative was a multi-phase three-year plan aimed at proving the efficacy of social circus via evaluation and research, and increasing the funding resource pool for these social circus organizations. AYCO hired a team of consultants, who had a deeply rooted understanding of social circus in the US as well as expertise in clinical counselling and nonprofit fundraising, to devise the initiative. Cirque du Soleil funded the inaugural phase in 2015 (Guilford 2014), and they have continued their generosity to date.

The goal of Phase One, which took place from October 2014 to September 2015, was to create a Social Circus Network with a mission of providing pedagogical, capacity-building, and professional development support to individuals and organizations pursuing and engaging in social circus work (Brookes 2015). This network would enable AYCO to do the following:

- Establish good practices for social circus programs
- Recognize social circus programs that currently employ good practices
- Identify needed capacity-building assistance for social circus projects
- Create a plan to provide this assistance
- Develop materials to help social circus programs build capacity

The consultants hired to work on this project identified that our first step would be redefining the parameters of what social circus means in the United States in order to build a stronger foundation for developing funding relationships. AYCO formed a committee of experts and hired a staff member to facilitate the network’s needs. We decided on a definition for social circus that would guide our work in establishing the proposed network and in making social circus a prominent and recognized practice in the US. The group devised a definition that determines social circus to be “a social change intervention that uses the circus arts as a tool for fostering personal and social development of identified “at-risk” individuals” (Brookes 2015).

In order to centre the Social Circus Network around tangible outcomes (more specifically, to drive funds and awareness to social circus), it was decided that entry would be based on three main criteria: organizations must be focused on a clearly specified “at-risk” population, they must be directed toward achieving a particular social change and specific outcomes related to that change, and they must have a commitment to evaluating effectiveness in achieving desired outcomes. After much discussion and strategizing, it was determined that if the network were to actively solicit funds, commission studies, and advocate for social circus, it was critical to include the requirement that programs serve identified “at-risk” individuals. This specified requirement was intended to develop higher quality collaborative efforts to prove the efficacy of social circus, hence answer Cirque du Soleil’s mandate. With the understanding that it is impossible to define “at-risk” in the term’s totality, we instructed applicants to the network to consider that the population they work with be a specific population that is disadvantaged in some way (Brookes 2015). This varies in different communities and contexts, but the intention unifies the network group and has already proven to be

helpful. When commissioning the first ever study about social circus, we decided to focus on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) outcomes. SEL is defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning as “The process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, etc. and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.” The fact that all of our network members had a common ground of serving a specific and disadvantaged population was helpful in crafting our research questions and strategy. There were zero complaints about these parameters once AYCO released them as there was a great deal of education and community outreach that explained why we made these constraints, and how they would serve the larger community (Brookes 2015).

Currently, the network comprises seventeen active member organizations that meet these criteria. Of these members, seven were present at the initial meeting in 2014. Two organizations applied for the network and were given a pending status, as they did not initially meet the criteria; however, they have since revised their programs to include evaluation, and their participation has since been approved. The other six organizations were not previously partnered with Cirque du Soleil, hence were not a part of the meeting group. Of those that attended the meeting but did not end up in the network, one organization did not meet the criteria, one opted not to join, one joined for a year but did not renew their commitment to the group, and the others in attendance were individuals who did not represent an organization that would be eligible to join.

The criteria are based on a keen awareness that, if we are to motivate growth of social circus in the US, we need to keep funding at the top of mind. For funders to invest in social circus, they need to know that it works—not just via anecdotes and relationship building with leaders, but via research as well. Up until this point, we have had very little US-based evidence beyond anecdotes to show funders and foundations about how and why circus works. Each body of research conducted in Canada, Finland, and Australia regarding circus as a tool for positive youth development has proven to have a significant impact on US-based constituents’ ability to raise funds (American Youth Circus Organization 2015). At the biennial American Circus Educators conference, keynote speakers citing studies about resilience, physical literacy, and readiness have provided circus educators and organizations with a language to advocate for their programs. There was reason to believe that a study conducted in the US about social circus and SEL outcomes would bring significant resources to not only the network members directly, but the sector at large.

Because of how organizations are funded in the US, and because circus education can be oriented in such a way that enables access to support from the educational and therapeutic realms, which are typically better supported and validated in the United States, being a social circus practitioner is a viable career path with a multitude of pathways for growth and entrepreneurship. It is arguably easier and more accessible to work professionally in social circus in the US than to become a professional circus performer. Based on my count, at this point, the US has more notable and internationally known social circus organizations than professional touring circus companies. In my experience managing relationships and job postings in the US circus education sector, there are typically more jobs than people suitable for those jobs within the social circus sector. I receive emails multiple times per month from students who have grown up in youth circus and are entering college seeking out degrees that align with social circus such as social work, occupational therapy, and youth development. With the appropriate cultivation, an entirely new generation of social circus innovators will emerge ready to occupy leadership positions.

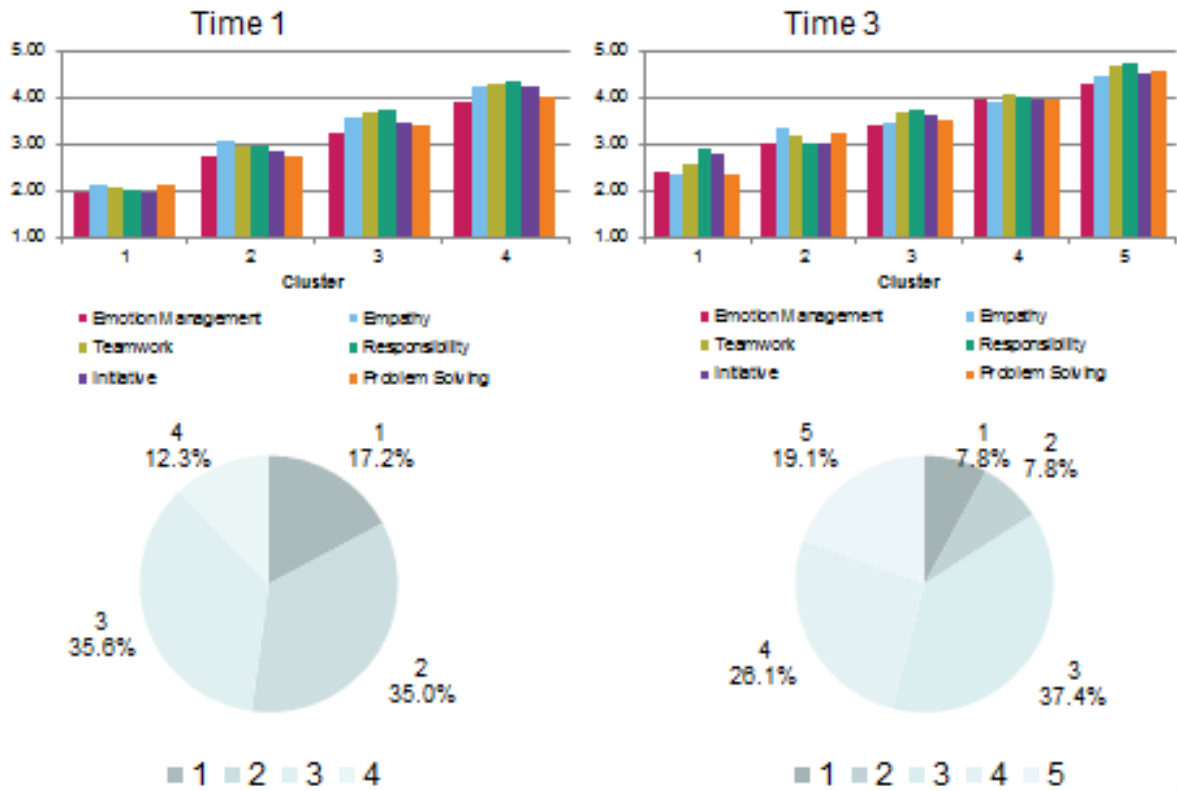
Much of the strategy of the first phase of the project related to gathering the currently functioning social circus organizations in the US together via a unified vision for growth, and investigating the funding structures at play as they relate to the future of social circus. While in many other countries there is government funding for the arts, arts in education, preventative healthcare, and other relevant subjects, in the US this type of support is minimal at best. The consultant team identified during the first phase of the project that the most effective strategy would be to develop a clear case for social circus via research and studies that show its impact in order to solidify relationships with foundations and private funders.

Phase Two of the initiative, which took place from October 2015 to September 2016 (Brookes 2015), led us to our first commission of research about social circus. Our staff came across the Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, an organization that researches SEL outcomes for youth programs. We pursued a relationship with them, and a month later we commissioned the first ever study about social circus and SEL outcomes. Because we had the Social Circus Network in place, we were able to collaborate with eight members who we knew had the capacity to be involved in the study. Eight organizations took part in the study, which was conducted over a nine-month period. Select staff members from participating organizations were trained to be evaluators and worked alongside Weikart experts to evaluate programs at three points during the study. Preliminary results released in August of 2017 showed significant evidence that the programs increased SEL outcomes for the youth who participated. The initial report delivered at the 2017 American Youth Circus Festival by the Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality revealed that:

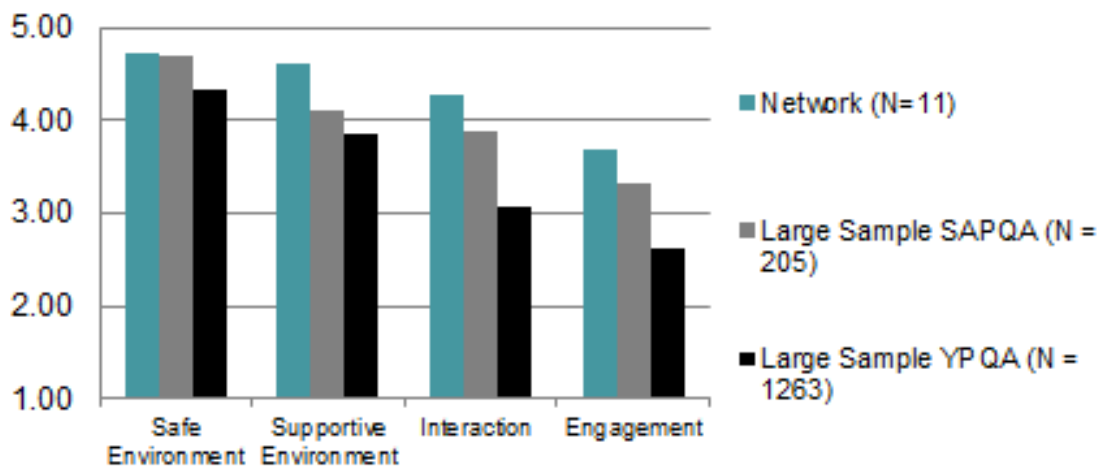
Measures of both staff and youth behaviour suggest that AYCO program settings are both delivering high quality programming and producing substantively important change in youth SEL behavioural skills. Specifically:

- Quality of staff SEL practices are substantially higher than Weikart Center's large reference sample for afterschool programs and approach the level of quality seen in the exemplary SEL programs in the SEL Challenge Study.
- Change in individual youth's SEL behavioural skills from baseline to post is uniformly positive, substantively large, and approaching the magnitude of effect found in the SEL Challenge Study. (Roy & Harris 2017)

The visuals below from the initial report reveal that there has been an overall improvement in SEL behaviour over the course of the study (with Time 1 being the first evaluation and Time 3 being the third evaluation out of three). This change is revealed by the cluster of the staff ratings of behaviour data for Time 1 and Time 3. Each one of the bars represents a Social and Emotional Learning domain. The pie charts provide a distribution of youth in each one of the clusters. At the first time point about 18 percent of students were in the "low" cluster, and at the third time point, only 8 percent were in the low cluster (Roy & Harris 2017).



Network Cluster Analysis Comparison. From L. M. Roy and J. M. Harris, "Planning with Data Workshop of the Center for Youth Program Quality." David R. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, 2017.



Network External Assessment Time 1 vs Large Sample External Assessment. From L. M. Roy and J. M. Harris, "Planning with Data Workshop of the Center for Youth Program Quality." David R. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, 2017.

Evaluation results paint a translatable picture of the efficacy of circus arts that we have rarely had access to. It speaks in multiple tongues: to funders, foundations, arts, social work, sport, and more. The numbers and the research speak volumes and result in increased advocacy and communication; our Network members can thus mobilize this information, as can the wider web of social circus programs and practitioners around the world, enabling growth of the sector with AYCO as a national force motivating its development.

The full results of the study were released in November 2017, to great excitement. We are currently in Phase Three of the Initiative, and our focus is on communicating our impact, making connections, and increasing participation. Our plan is to work on generating original media content to help funders and supporters understand what social circus is and can be, and to continue moving toward our goal of sustainable growth of social circus programs in the US, as well as encouraging increased effectiveness and capacity of these programs.

Phase Three also addresses AYCO's first attempt at creating training resources for social circus practitioners, young adults rising into leadership in social circus programs, and young adults seeking social circus-related work as a profession. Alongside training hosted by Cirque du Monde, and via young adults attending higher education institutions with a focus on or affinity with social circus, this prepares us to further develop and expand the field. We remain dedicated to developing the evaluation capacity of our community and are working with Dr. Jen Agans to develop a databank of questions for circus organizations to use to evaluate their social circus programs, and subsequently garner support. This information will be made public and available for all programs to use in 2018. As Research Associate in the Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research and Assistant Director of the [Program for Research on Youth Development and Engagement \(PRYDE\)](#) at Cornell University, Dr. Agans is uniquely suited to develop this databank. She received her PhD from the Eliot Pearson Department of Child Study and Human Development at Tufts University and grew up in a youth circus in New Hampshire. Further, Dr. Agans grew up attending AYCO events and now serves on the Board of Directors; she thus understands the efficacy of circus both experientially and academically.

In conclusion, we have found that, by organizing and structuring our approach to social circus, we have been able to deliver outcomes that will drive resources and support to the social circus sector. We believe that any research about social circus impacts our entire global community, while recognizing that in the US there is a unique funding and support generation context that we must address through our actions. The success and power of communicating the benefits and efficacy of social circus work can help to continually elevate and reshape the cultural understanding of circus in general in the United States by proving that circus works as a tool for social intervention.

References

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