

The 'seed' for what became Throwdown was planted around 2004 (give or take a year) at a gathering of artist activists and arts educators in Philadelphia that was convened by the Pew Trust called, Power in Practice. The Pew Trust brought five people from 14 cities to Philadelphia and had them use Open Space Technology to figure out the work they needed to do. Community-based public artist and teaching artist, Jeff Mather, was one of the five people in the group from Atlanta. On the final day of the gathering, a woman from the contingent from Santa Fe, New Mexico, spoke up when everyone (about 100 people) were sitting in a large circle and said that she had been wondering why so much was spent by school systems to bus student athletes from school to school for meets/matches/scrimmages and her question was: couldn't these kinds of resources also be put toward bussing student artists from school to school so that they could engage with one another.

This moment of thinking out loud got a big response from everyone around the circle ("Hey, yeah! Why not?!?") and when Jeff returned to Atlanta he told John Brandhorst, the head of the Art Department at Grady High School about this moment and they began a series of conversation about what a program might look like that brought high school artists together from different schools. An early idea was that the artist teams from each school that participated would be multi-arts teams, or "MATs" and the teams each school assembled, through auditions or try outs just like trying out for a play or a spot on a sports team, might be different to best represent the strengths of that particular school. For instance, one school's team might consist of two writers, two musicians, two 'techies,' two visual artists, two dancers, and two theater artists.

John brought this idea up with different people from Atlanta Public Schools and other metro Atlanta school systems and heard very positive reactions but it was still simmering on a 'back burner' until one of John's students, Perrin Turner, came up with an idea along similar lines and took on a leadership role organizing an event, held at StudioPlex, that became the first Throwdown. Only two high schools had teams there, but it got the ball rolling. The 'buy in' came from a group of visual art teachers and so the Throwdown competitions, (timed Still Life Drawing, Figure Drawing, Collaborative Sculpture), were mostly visual arts and the MATs idea was put on the shelf. But both Jeff and John kept looking for ways to include multi-arts challenges, including performance art.

Later, as each Throwdown became a unique event with different challenges, performance components became stronger. Also added were graphic design competitions, photography competitions, critical writing competitions, exhibit design competitions, Vine videos, and fashion competitions. Cheryl Myrbo became a key community partner for Throwdown and orchestrated it's expansion into becoming part of the annual Dogwood Festival and also at other venues. Cheryl also built the Throwdown website where people curious about having their student artists participate could see images and videos of what the events were like. The High Museum became an important community partner organization and hosted four Throwdowns over a five year period.

--Jeff Mather, Art Throwdown
<http://communitybuilt.org/jeff-mather/>