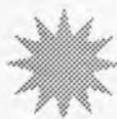


Creativity as a Subversive Activity



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In all the arts, the most cherished act is that of creation. Yet in many ways, creativity remains the most elusive of all the aspects of the arts. It is often characterized as an almost mysterious activity—even regarded by some as a subversive one, attributed to genius and not of or for the “common” person. However, it seems evident that we are all creative—to a degree. The questions are, What elements foster creative ability? Can we as arts educators enhance the creative works of our students? Do we play a positive role in this process, or is it better to just stay out of the way and let the creative act unfold? Do we even know what the creative act is?

We who work in arts education are used to fighting for our place in the sun. In America, the arts have traditionally been seen as a stepchild of the educational hierarchy, and they are often regarded as an “extra” or a “frill.” However, the arts more and more are being regarded as a legitimate discipline, equal to any other. Certainly they constitute a body of knowledge with a “literature,” a history and several “languages” equal in importance and complexity to those in many other disciplines. However, in trying to teach the arts,

especially at the K–12 level, arts educators have fallen short in two major areas. First, in approaching the arts from the viewpoint of the audience, we have not done a very good job presenting the aesthetic domain. We dissect technique and define style *ad infinitum* but come up short when dealing with the appreciation of a work of art—the power felt in the non-verbal language used by the artist. Second, from the viewpoint of the practitioner, we do not quite know how to handle the hot potato of creativity. What causes a person to be creative—or to be more creative than another—we just don't know. Perhaps if we could better talk about the aesthetic domain, this discussion might further the creative impulse. The experience of art, be it that of the creator or the audience, is a topic worth more attention.

However, there are many factors that help arts educators to further the appreciation of art. The arts have a remarkable dual power: they can introduce individuality and at the same time introduce universals, things that we all can share. In this respect, they constantly keep us alive and move us forward. Anyone who has taught in or observed an elementary classroom is impressed with the energy and vitality exhibited by the children. It is very easy to encourage them to be creative; they are creative naturally, without any serious urging. The question is, What happens to this wonderful creative energy as they mature? As their sense of self matures, as they become vulnerable, are they no longer willing to take the risk?

Clearly, creative artists are risk-takers; their personal reputation is always on the line. As the child approaches puberty and begins to sense the adult self, often that sense of unabandoned creativity is lost. As our defenses of our vulnerable self get stronger, often the risk of creativity proves too great to bear. Such “shades of the prison house” are also accompanied by an increased awareness on the part of the student that being creative is not rewarded. Rather, traditional schooling often points the student to the one “right” answer. Although lip service may be paid to wanting to turn out stu-

dents who can think for themselves and who can question using various modes of inquiry, in reality these actions often are not rewarded by the educational system. When these things occur, we must ask ourselves if the educational process fosters the goals we actually want to achieve.

We ought not to overlook the way in which the arts, as grade levels progress, are increasingly relegated to the sidelines, while at the same time they are viewed, music especially, as a vehicle for imbuing students with rudiments of socialization. Past the primary grades, the arts tend to serve either those students less able at academic subjects or the goals of group activity; bands and choruses teach us to “work and play well together.” Wherein lies creativity? How are students encouraged to go beyond the bounds of received knowledge? Venture a new way of seeing? How are they taught to take chances in their growth and learning?

The risk, of course, is the risk of being subversive, of acting out one’s unique powers and thereby creating something “new.” The creative act is always an alteration of the present order of things. Each painting, poem, musical piece, or even idea at least attempts to present something of the world anew, to re-order, re-form or in-form for the very first time. And while we value such acts in young children—refrigerator magnets holding up art across society attest to the nurturing and valuing of creativity—recent moves by as well as attacks upon the NEA bear witness to a societal view of the arts as truly subversive. Are we as arts educators willing to teach about subversion, let alone foster and teach subversion itself?

It is ironic perhaps that recently the Japanese have focused on creativity within the American educational system. Although we may not feel that we are fostering creativity in our schools, apparently the Japanese feel otherwise. Asian cultures promote a very different aesthetic in art, which centers on copying. Asian children spend long hours copying the masterworks of their culture and are rewarded for the best copies. Not coincidentally, this ability to copy is what

has boosted the Japanese and Korean economies to soaring heights over the last twenty years. They have taken the products of the Western World, copied them, and made improvements on them until the copies out-perform the originals. Now, however, they realize that this ability to copy can take them only so far economically. Now they are seeking individuals who are truly creative—who can dream up products that no one has ever thought of—and they are turning to the American educational system to see how it is done, for they feel we do a better job in this area than they. Big business the world over is now in the same mode; creative individuals are prized and sought after. The world's new billionaires, Bill Gates and his colleagues at Microsoft, work by sitting around and creating all day. Surely, this is a powerful model for convincing students to be creative and inventive.

Some corporations are bringing in artists on a regular basis to talk to their employees about the creative process, saying, according to Toby Devan Lewis, art curator of the Progressive Corporation, "Interacting with art and artists challenges the natural inclination to remain inflexible." In the same September 8, 1991, article in *The New York Times*, author Claudia H. Deutsch states, "In nearly all cases, the goal is the same: to unleash latent creative activity so that employees can find fresh solutions to old problems." The question remains, Is this possible? What is the key that unlocks creativity, and who locked it up in the first place?

We professionals in the arts certainly are not of like mind on this issue. Richard Riddell, director of the Institute for Advanced Theatre Training at Harvard University, believes that the creative arts have little place in the American university. In *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 22, 1989, he says, "In the optimistic, bright-eyed days of the 1950s and early '60s, the university imagined it could do a great deal. It imagined it could develop artists. We now know it can't." He advocates that universities focus on Ph.D. programs in the history, criticism, and theory of the arts,

and abandon all doctoral programs in the creative arts. In this somewhat elitist view, the creative arts are the domain of only the “genuinely gifted” individual, clearly a small minority. A more optimistic view is provided by John F. Noonan, formerly the director of the Center for the Improvement of Teaching Effectiveness of Virginia Commonwealth University. He was brought to a look at creativity in his attempt to gauge the quality of teaching in the arts. Dr. Noonan concludes that when teaching in a creative mode, the “normal” terms don’t apply. In arts classes, he observed a mentoring relationship in which both teacher and student were intensely involved in their work. Both were also vulnerable—in an atmosphere in which intense criticism of both the mentor and mentee was ongoing. In this milieu, the teacher never ceased being a student as well; he or she was continually sticking his or her neck out. Also key to this process is learning by doing—modeling after the mentor—wherein the role model provided by the faculty mentor is crucial. Herein, it is essential that faculty remain active as practicing artists because the learning takes place by doing. Therefore, Noonan feels that the creative process definitely can be fostered—although not perhaps to the “genius” level—the only acceptable level for Riddell.

A related issue long debated in academia is how to evaluate the work of the creative artist as faculty member, whose work does not fit nicely into the “normal” modes of scholarship desired by the academy. How does one evaluate this subversive activity for purposes of tenure or promotion? Clark Kerr provides one answer. In a 1976 article, after referring to the creative arts as a fifth stream of intellectual endeavor—along with the professions, the humanities, the sciences, and the social sciences—he states:

The puzzle: why are the creative arts so different from so much of the rest of higher education? Why do they not fit better into the formulas? Why are they not so easily accepted as are so many other fields? I have come to this

conclusion tentatively: that the other fields operate more in a vertical way, they build more upon prior scholarship; and that this makes it easier to evaluate performance. Has the person read the literature and do his footnotes show that he has? Does he know the accepted methodology and can he use it? But you get to this fifth stream of thought—the creative arts—which move more laterally, move more horizontally; an area where people are trying to move away from the beaten paths, where they are seeking to have some kind of an individual inspiration which draws away from the past, where they even seek to repudiate the past.

So the traditional notions which tend to inhibit the creative impulse as early as the elementary school may also affect the possible tenure of the creative arts professor at the university.

Several questions remain. Are arts practitioners within the academy different from their colleagues in the “real” world? What makes up the artistic or creative temperament? To address these issues, psychologists also have studied the riddle of creativity.

In a recent *New York Times* article, Daniel Goleman reports on three major new theories of creativity which “nest inside one another like Russian dolls”:

1. *The Thrill of the Moment*: here, the artist reports feeling a moment in which he or she is “super-alert”—it is a mark of what psychologists call the “flow” state, an altered awareness found in people performing at their peak. It is a “thrill” state, which motivates artists to keep at it year after year. It seems to have its own reward, that of spurring the artist on to even greater heights and challenges.

2. *Challenges over a Lifetime*: Howard Gardener of Harvard examined the lives of a handful of virtuosos, each of whose work transformed his or her field. One phenomenon evident at this exalted level was the ten-year rule—that great crea-

tive bursts come in ten-year cycles. Also, he found that “typically, high-level creators have come from geographical regions removed from the centers of power and from families that valued discipline and achievement.” Another pattern revealed in this study was that often the person’s work reflected “a kind of coming home” that places the person’s work in a broader frame, reconciling it with basic values.

3. *Awaiting the Renaissance*: Keith Simonton, examining creativity by looking at the big picture—over the last 2500 years—concludes that “greater wealth, geographic expansion, a centralized nation-state and waging wars have little or nothing to do with producing a creative society. Instead, political fragmentation emerged as the single best social predictor of grand escalations in creativity. Typically, a creative upsurge takes place about twenty years after a rebellion as the first generation of artists matures free of the paralyzing limitations of a restrictive, monolithic power.” This theory, therefore, debunks the view that art precedes or predicts the future.

As revealing as these theories are, they still do not reveal a secret method with which to unlock the muse. However, I believe that the following summarizes much of what is known about fostering creativity:

1. The young seem to create inherently and naturally without much urging. However, this urge seems to subside sometime in the late elementary grades, perhaps in direct correlation with an emerging sense of the educated self.

2. A good model helps—witnessing the creative instructor at work can also unlock creative desires in the student.

3. In some of the arts, especially music, the hurdle of learning the “language” (notation) can act as a deterrent to the creative impulse. Some methods, such as the Manhattanville project of the late 1960s, have been developed to overcome this hurdle—with mixed success.

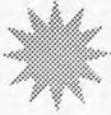
4. Young creators should not be discouraged from copying

or imitating the style of others. Many great artists have begun in exactly this way—later to assimilate several styles into a voice of their own.

5. Creativity can often be approached through a limiting process. There is a wide world of choice which confronts the beginner. Initially limiting the form or limiting the content helps to focus on some known quantities. It is essential to know thoroughly the innermost structure of the materials being used to help foster the creative process.

6. Creativity is integral to both problem-solving and problem-finding. However, research studies reveal that problem-finding is the more creative activity.

Most importantly, we in arts education must believe that creative potential lies within all of our students. We can measure many things but fall short when trying to measure the most important thing of all—desire. To foster and support the desire to be creative within our students is the greatest achievement of all. Once that dream is realized, the educational community will look to arts education to lead young people to experience that vital combination at the very heart of our American democracy: a strong belief in the collective experience and a commitment to the worth of the individual, often best realized through valuing the creative act—the most individual act of all.



On Creativity

Imagination, not invention, is the supreme master of art as of life.

— Joseph Conrad

Only... when one has conceived a complete image in one's heart can one start artistic composition.

— Feodor Dostoevsky

The writer who possesses the creative gift owns something of which he is not always master—something that, at times, strangely wills and works for itself.

— Charlotte Brontë

The basic fact was true, and remains true to this day, that the juxtaposition of two shots by splicing them together, resembles not so much a simple sum of one shot plus another shot as it does a creation.

— Sergei Eisenstein

Images are the language of the imagination; words are the language of our rational mind.

— Glenn F. Jackson