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Bringing Creativity Back

The assumption that all children who step into the art room are ready to let the creative juices flow is a false assumption when applied to some children or students of some teachers. But we shouldn't let this cloudy forecast upset us as art educators, but we should take it as a challenge to check our teaching styles and ask if we have set up an environment which encourages creativity. As artists, we have a natural inclination to practice our creativity through art making, so how do we teach our students to practice theirs? As cited by Milbrandt (2011), the anthropologist Dissanayake says that all humans have the capacity to be creative. Further, being creative and making art are necessary for survival as it helps us to adapt, change, and communicate with others (Milbrandt, 2011). We see our natural need to be creative in toddlers when they first begin to draw and make pictures which tell their stories or in children playing without store bought toys to tell them what to play. As a teacher of older children, I see the way to get our students creativity back is to provide them with a safe environment that allows them to play with their ideas and solve visual problems creatively.

To define an act or product as creative, it must be new, novel, and change the existing domain as experienced by the persons in the environment (Beghetto, 2005). Creative individuals exercise two stages of thinking that develop new novel products which others see as useful. The creative individual is able to independently navigate divergent thinking skills where one produces new ideas or problems and is able to brainstorm possible solutions to a perceived problem. After divergent thinking, the individual is prepared to navigate convergent thinking skills by participating in a process similar to the scientific method of evaluating their ideas, carrying out the necessary tasks to try the ideas, and communicating the results with others (Beghetto, 2005). In the classroom, we may look for what Fletcher calls "Little C" learning which results in "Big C" development over time (Fletcher, 2011). Fletcher defines "Big C" as the products that are domain or world changing, while "Little C" actions are solutions that are personally satisfying and stimulating. Both are relevant and count as creative acts (Fletcher, 2011).

Becoming fluent in the process to produce creative products is a contemporary worry for art educators as we see our students forget, lose, or reject their natural capacities to be creative individuals. Viktor Lowenfield found that the creative process develops autonomy in individuals, free to think, act on, and stand beside their own ideas (Milbrandt, 2011). If they are not fluent in the skills of a creative person, then how will they participate in a faster changing world, where they will be the work force? In the future, as referenced by Zimmerman (2009), Florida (2002) shares the ideas that there will be a creative class of workers and jobs which are dependent on creative ideation for political, economic, and cultural growth and demands (Zimmerman, 2009). In order for our students to be ready for the demands of the work force they will grow in to, they must be prepared and have the skills necessary to develop ideas that will be novel and useful in the context of the world in which they will live. Our students will have careers that require divergent thinking and the ability to be flexible with their modes of decision making. On the other side of this concern of contemporary art educators is the effect that

testing legislation has had on student preparation. As a result of No Child Left Behind and an increasing emphasis on formative assessments Milbrandt (2011), says that educators are seeing students that are unable to seek, confront, and solve non-linear or divergent problems (Milbrandt, 2011). She states that, "this unbalance in educational experiences and competencies is leaving a gap in the preparation of future citizens and leaders" (Milbrandt, 2011, p. 8). This leaves the challenge to teachers, namely art educators to nurture atmospheres that encourage and develop creativity. In our classrooms, we can provide a balance of academic learning while fostering creative production practices. We must provide our students with an art education that counteracts an emphasis on wrong and right answers.

The world of our students must be considered when devising ways to meet the concerns of art educators wanting to bring creativity back to their student's lives. Recognizing the conditions that our students are learning and living in will help to devise a plan for developing creativity. We must recognize that our students are over scheduled, watch an abundance of television, or play hours of pre-story lined video games, can be self-conscious in front of their peers, and have become focused on their own test scores and look to always have correct answers (Gude, 2010). These conditions inhibit our student's creativity or create resistance to divergent thinking. As the leader in our classrooms we can change the effects of these conditions by acknowledging which conditions are relevant for our students and changing the atmosphere of our classrooms. Gude (2010) recalls Carl Rogers' research on psychological safety conditions and the psychological freedom that erupts from overcoming negative conditions which hinder creativity. Rogers' sites accepting individual's unconditional worth, the absence of an external climate of evaluation, and an empathic understanding develops psychological freedom (Gude, 2010). Psychological freedom develops thoughtful outcomes and positive responsible citizens that take responsibility for what they produce (Gude, 2010). When students are worried about finding the right answer, they resist the urge to be creative with their solution. Many contemporary students show a disinterest in the Visual Arts, because of either a disconnect with the rest of their educational career or because of the stress that occurs when being asked to produce their own answers. Gude states, "A teacher's awareness of why students might feel discomfort in engaging in artistic processes can be a powerful tool for allaying hidden anxieties and for then using dialogue to collaboratively construct a safe space" (Gude, 2010, p. 33).

The culture of the classroom managed by a concerned art educator can increase a student's level of creativity. Systems of positive values and attitudes maintain higher levels of creative production (Covington, 1967). Covington lists the qualities of a positive attitude as resulting in persons looking at phenomena in different ways, possessing a tolerance for adversity, a confidence in their abilities, and a belief that their products are worthwhile (Covington, 1967). Art educators must set up their classrooms to produce assessments where students are not looking for correct answers, but are showing evidence of personal reflection and experimentation (Milbrandt, 2011). Our students must be able to succeed in a task on a personal level that is not measured against their classmates. When students are able to succeed on tasks of varying difficulty, their self-confidence is promoted (Covington, 1967). Teachers who set goals that are about outperforming others, avoiding mistakes, and making the highest grade ultimately diminish their student's creativity and willingness to try new ideas. This negative focus causes

students to view their mistakes as a lack in personal ability producing high levels of anxiety, less effort, and self-sabotaging actions (Beghetto, 2005).

To say that stress is a total negative, is a misnomer. When it comes to creative exercise, a small amount of manageable stress can be a positive. Environments of no stress can produce apathy while high stress environments create agitation reflecting in a stifling of creativity (Fletcher, 2011). The student who feels compelled to find a personally relevant solution is focused and self-driven to continue with a task for an extended time. This student has found what Fletcher termed as “Flow,” the ability to work on multiple solutions feeling only what is relevant to the activity existing with a happily focused mind that may not appear outwardly happy to observers (Fletcher, 2011). The student who has flow is engaged and working like an artist. “An artist must make a commitment to actively and seriously engaging the materials and forms at hand while simultaneously remaining loose and experimental” (Gude, 2010, p. 33). In short, a student who has found flow has surrendered to the process of making art. They are using their skills to manipulate the materials in ways that cause them to process their results as they happen and change their plans or try new ways of working that may solve any issues that may arise.

Art educators have a distinct placement and responsibility in the art community of teaching students about the practices of artists and what art is while also being artists of the art community. As artists understand the value of the learning process, art educators are challenged to create strategies that are conducive to learning (Anderson, 1981). Art educators are able to support their students in the creative learning process, because of their knowledge of subject matter and materials, and because they possess the skills to communicate with their students on the students level (Anderson, 1981). Art educators that are able to recognize students for their creative efforts are providing the environment necessary for creative production. As teachers, we must remember that just because a creative contribution is not a revolutionary contribution to us, it is for our students and it is no less creative (Beghetto, 2005). Artistic thinking and learning is socially and developmentally valuable. Students have to be given the opportunity to produce domain changes that are creative within the context of our individual classrooms (Milbrandt, 2011). As educators, when we are providing opportunities for our students to increase their creativity, we must minimize assessments that compare our students socially on scales that are competitive (Beghetto, 2005). We have to remember that art can be a vehicle for personal transformation making life better, connecting us to each other, and encouraging community (Milbrandt, 2011).

The problem of increasing our student’s creativity can be met by adding problem solving activities to the art curriculum. Creative problem solving circulates in a process that moves within a divergent to convergent cycle of problem and fact finding, analysis, idea generation, and judgment (Milbrandt, 2011). The process gives students the ability to generate multiple ideas or solutions which are neither wrong or right, but are more or less successful, thus giving students and teachers an advanced understanding of their creative abilities (Milbrandt, 2011). By participating in creative play to solve problems, students learn to respond to a variety of situations with creative behaviors (Gude, 2010). Covington (1967) argues that by including problem solving activities to art curriculums, we are giving our students the experience of managing their skills and materials at a level not often required in

most art making lessons. Navigating the task independently requires the child to thoughtfully look at the visual task and develop coordination in thinking skills. Producing successful products from creative play will increase a student's appreciation for the arts and artistic modes of working, because the student will have engaged in the frustrations and satisfactions experienced by artists when creating a product that is personally meaningful (Covington, 1967).

Teachers have to be sensitive to the conditions of their classroom and daily practices that make their classrooms not conducive to the strategies of the process of creative problem solving. Art educators should reconsider their established values and practices which have possibly created a climate that hinders creativity. They must create an atmosphere where their students feel safe to make decisions and share or try their ideas (Gude, 2010). Teachers should post their students work but refrain from posting grades. Art educators can act as role models to their students by demonstrating and providing an image of how artists approach problems. As the facilitator, the teacher can create the appropriate amount of time for the students to work within, but without the pressure of not having enough time for students who require more time. Within the time to work, students need to be provided with feedback and guidance as encouragement to proceed with working ideas or criticism to rethink unsuccessful ideas. In addition, students need to be provided with the tools and materials that can help students produce the amount of work they may make in the process (Fletcher, 2011). Gude(2010) distinguishes quality creative projects as those that allow for multiple subjects and styles to develop from a given task. The ability to play and engage deeply in the process is how teachers allow their students to develop a flow when implementing their creative ideals.

When art educators create an environment where their students feel comfortable to express and try their ideas, they will have brought the notion of creativity back into the classroom. Students need to know that their ideas are valuable and that they can create products that are useful to their community. Students who have a heightened level of creativity are motivated and interested in learning. They possess positive attitudes which allow them to take risks and persevere through the challenges that come with life (Beghetto, 2005). These confident and creative children are willing to ask for help and use criticism to better navigate the process of learning from trying again, and again, and again. In the end, the students produced from a classroom that fosters creativity will have the tools needed to succeed. We have to train our students to change domains on a personal level so that they can be ready to change domains on a global level.

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