

Creativity and Art Education: A New Look at an Old Relationship

by

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Art education has long been considered synonymous with creativity. Yet, it is ironic that art is sometimes taught in ways that actually discourage creative thinking. When learning in art centers upon copying magazine pictures, following prescribed formulas, entering art contests, and memorizing art facts the students' ability and desire to think creatively about visual imagery, content and form is hindered. In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in creative thinking among researchers in both cognitive psychology and the arts. Art teachers can benefit by examining this newer research on creativity and by considering its implications when planning art learning experiences intended to promote creativity in the classroom. Accordingly, the following brief summary of some of the more significant work and thinking in this area is offered as a guide.

Perkins (1984) defines creative thinking as "thinking patterned in a way that tends to lead to creative results" (p.18). According to this definition, the ultimate criteria for judging a person's thinking as creative lies in the product or results produced by that thinking. For an outcome to be considered creative, Perkins suggests that two conditions must be met: First, it must be original; secondly, it must be appropriate. Of course, matters of originality and appropriateness are contextual and conditional. Creative products are usually acknowledged as significant when they surpass the culturally-derived standards commonly used within the domain in question. There is surprising consistency among experts and laypersons in judging the originality of art products despite differing interpretations of originality (Getzels & Csikszentmihalyi, 1976).

Creativity is typically associated with persons who have a special and mysterious talent in a particular field. The names of Beethoven, Einstein, Picasso and others well-known for their uncommon achievements are often conjured up in name of creativity. Amabile (1989) argues, however, that to view creativity in only such extraordinary terms is misleading. It suggests that very few adults are "creative people" or that very few children are likely to become so. Creativity, according to Amabile, should not be used to describe persons; rather, it should describe ideas, behaviors and products that are "appropriately novel." From this perspective, the potential for creative thinking exists for everyone in everyday experiences. Amabile offers the following example: "Jonathan comes home from the second grade

on a rainy afternoon, sits at the kitchen table with his crayons, and makes a drawing entitled 'Rainbow'. It depicts several clouds with bow ties falling from them (p. 18). Because Jonathan had never seen a picture of bow ties falling from the sky, Amabile suggests that his drawing is certainly novel for him (and probably so when compared to other children's drawings). Furthermore, Jonathan's insightful visual pun for a rainbow is "charmingly appropriate."

Researchers generally agree that some elements of creativity are inborn while others depend on education, experience and social environment. Amabile claims that people need to acquire a relevant knowledge base and skills in a particular domain in order to produce notable creative work in that area. Domain skills are to some extent inborn; however, education and experience in a domain are essential to increase an individual's knowledge and skills to even modest levels.

Being able to consistently produce creative results also heavily depends on the use of certain thinking abilities and dispositions. Over the years, researchers and experts have produced a number of lists and descriptions of the cognitive operations and attitudes considered to be relevant to creative thinking. Perhaps the best known of these is the one first advanced by Guilford (1950) which includes four creative thinking abilities: *fluency*, *flexibility*, *originality*, and *elaboration*. Over the past four decades many of the programs and test instruments developed to enhance and measure creativity have focused, for the most part, on changes in these four areas. Yet, several experts have recently criticized the types of problems used to teach or investigate creative thinking based on Guilford's original model on the grounds that the skills involved do not seem to correspond well with real-world creativity or actual creative accomplishments. For instance, Perkins (1981) shows that even though persons of demonstrated creative ability may score high on measures of ideational fluency, they do not always engage in long searches in their day-to-day work. This calls into question the tendency among teachers to simply associate creativity with the ability to think up many ideas (*fluency*) and, thus, to engage their students in "brainstorming" activities in order to encourage creativity in the classroom.

Both Perkins and Amabile refer to creativity as a "combination of ingredients" which include various

abilities, attitudes, beliefs and tactics such as the following:

- a desire to work hard and at the edge of one's abilities and knowledge,
- a willingness to drop unproductive ideas and temporarily set aside stubborn problems,
- a willingness to persist in the face of complexity, difficulty or uncertainty,
- a willingness to take risks and expose oneself to failure or criticism,
- a willingness to suspend judgment so that all possibilities can be considered,
- a belief in one's own standards of evaluation and the use of those standards to judge the worth of one's ideas or work,
- a desire to do something because it's interesting or personally challenging to pursue,
- a desire to go beyond the obvious and break from habitual thinking,
- an ability to use various tactics to reframe ideas and problems in order to generate new perspectives,
- an ability to find relationships between different ideas or events,
- an ability to concentrate effort and attention for long periods of time,
- a belief in doing something well for the sake of personal pride and integrity.

Art teachers might use the above list as a source for evaluating both their students' skill and motivation in achieving creative outcomes as well as their own proficiency in promoting these abilities and dispositions through instruction. When doing so, however, teachers should recognize that significant gains in these areas will require extensive practice and a classroom environment conducive to such development.

One of the biggest challenges art teachers face in their efforts to foster the habits of mind associated with creative thinking involves the influence of extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivation. Amabile (1983) has studied the effects of external surveillance, evaluation and rewards on artistic and verbal creativity in both adults and children. The results of her work provide clear evidence that external devices such as competitions and grades can undermine interest and creative performance in an activity that initially is perceived by individuals as intrinsically rewarding in itself. In other words, it appears that when people believe they are being watched or that their work will be evaluated against the work of others, their ability and desire to perform creatively is severely curtailed. According to Amabile (1989), "even praise can lead children to be less creative, if that praise makes them focus on how their work is going to be evaluated" (p.73).

Drawing upon Amabile's work, Gerhart (1986) reports similar findings in a study involving the effects of evaluative statements on the continuing motivation of fourth-grade students regarding drawing and visual puzzles. He found that the threat of grades or peer comparisons seems to weaken children's willingness to commit themselves to further task participation involving the same activity. Consequently, this line of research suggests very strongly that art teachers should

refrain from using grades or competitions to foster creativity in students and instead encourage intrinsic motivation--a desire to pursue a task or activity for its own sake. One way for art teachers to promote intrinsic motivation is to select problems or devise activities that students will find inherently interesting and enjoyable so that they will engage in these tasks willingly without the need for extrinsic rewards.

Art lessons that challenge students to use their existing art knowledge and skills in new, yet somewhat familiar, situations can foster such interest and involvement. For instance, the Wilsons (1982) suggest a number of drawing games that challenge children to draw as many of something as they can or to draw something, for example, animals, cars or people, in as many different ways as they can. Of course, children often find studio art activities to be enjoyable and intrinsically rewarding. For this reason alone, many teachers are reluctant to reduce the time students spend making art in order to increase the time available for classroom dialogue about art. Yet, the sharing of one's intellectual processes with others can also be intrinsically rewarding and motivating to students. Accordingly, the use of collaborative learning strategies involving students in group discussions and interpretations of works of art can also lead to the development of creative behaviors.

Finally, the art tasks that perhaps have the most potential for fostering creative dispositions are those selected by the students themselves. If children are to be more thoughtful and interested in art as adults, we need to allow them to act upon their own intellectual initiative as often as possible in their art classes at school. When we make all of the decisions for them, children may fail to see art as a cognitive activity worth pursuing or as something important to their lives outside of school. In this way, students are more likely to choose to be creative if they are given opportunities to make meaningful choices on their own.

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