Promoting Creativity in the Art Class through Assessment

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Some of you may be wondering why I have chosen to link creativity, which is an exciting idea, to assessment which is commonly regarded as both boring and irritating. I will make the case today that assessment, appropriately done, is an important tool in the promotion of creativity in the arts program. Many will argue that assessment inhibits creative behavior, but in truth it is only inappropriate assessment that has this effect. Appropriate assessment strategies will drive the curriculum towards the promotion of creativity in student work and thinking. In fact, I will argue that, without appropriate assessment expectations, the classroom conditions for creative behavior can be effectively destroyed. I will talk first about the notion of creativity itself, and then I will discuss the ways in which appropriate assessment can promote it.

Developing creativity has long been one of the main arguments in support of art education given that the notion of creativity is embedded in the idea of artistic practice. It is widely accepted that making art requires a creative act and this is an idea that is seldom challenged in the context of art education. However a common error of logic is to reverse the creativity argument by assuming that students who study a subject called art will become creative by virtue of taking the subject. Such an assumption is seriously flawed but unfortunately seems to have been ignored because of misconceptions about the notion of creativity itself.

Attempts to define and measure creativity can be found littered through the research literature in psychology and art education since the nineteen fifties. Much of the creativity research in art education has been focused upon giftedness and the task of identifying creative individuals. Of particular interest to scholars in the field of creativity has been the development of techniques to identify the personality characteristics and dispositions of creative individuals.

The work of Getzels and Jackson (1971) in the early nineteen seventies revealed some fascinating distinctions between the dispositions and performance of high intelligence students compared to high IQ students. Two large groups of adolescent subjects were identified in a U.S. Midwestern private secondary school. These groups were tested with a range of intelligence and creativity measures to select those students with high intelligence or high creativity. In other words those with very high measures in intelligence but not high in


measures of creativity were placed in the high IQ group, and those with very high measures in creativity but not in I.Q. were placed in the other group. Those students measuring high in both were removed from the study.

The two groups were compared in a variety of ways to try to determine differences between them with respect to their academic achievement, which groups were preferred by teachers, personal qualities possessed by individuals in the two groups, career aspirations and so on. When the comparisons were complete it was surprising to find that the high creativity group performed equally well academically with the high IQ group in comparison to the overall school average. Despite a twenty point difference in the mean I.Q. scores the high creative group was performing beyond the predictive expectation suggested by their IQ score.

The obvious question raised by this finding is why? Why is it that highly creative individuals appear to over-achieve their academic potential as predicted by their measured I.Q. score? The researchers hypothesized that perhaps teachers liked them and preferred creative individuals as students in their classes. Perhaps teachers gave special attention to them. But further investigation revealed the opposite was true. Despite equivalents in academic performance teachers preferred the high IQ group to the high creative group. The high creative group possessed personality and behavioral traits that did not fit well with the teachers’ preferences. The researchers also found that high IQ students valued personal qualities likely to prepare them for adult success. The highly creative group preferred the opposite. Where the high IQ group favored those qualities they believed the teacher liked, the highly creative group preferred those having no relationship with what they believed would make for adult success, and appeared to deliberately select those personal qualities they thought were directly opposite those that their teachers favored (p.127). Creative students it seems are rebellious, uncooperative and nonconforming.

The overall conclusions from the study reported those things that we still take for granted today with respect to our expectations for creative behavior. Creative individuals are divergent thinkers because they possess the ability to produce new forms, to risk, conjoining elements that are customarily thought of as independent and dissimilar, or in other words “go off in new directions.” (p.131). Creative individuals also seem to enjoy risk taking and the uncertainty of the unknown. The high I.Q. students, on the other hand, shy away from the risk and uncertainty of the unknown, and need to be “channeled and controlled” in the direction of the right (predetermined) answer (P. 131). They desire conformity.

This study by Getzels and Jackson is typical of most of the research that was undertaken in the sixties and seventies in the search for answers to the question what are the characteristics of creative individuals? We now have a good set of understandings that help us identify creative individuals by virtue of their behavior. But this knowledge does not help us much with pedagogy. If we
know creative individuals are nonconforming, and rebellious does it follow that we should try to change the personalities of our students in the hope that they will become creative? Do we direct them to reject authority and seek goals that will not suit them well for adult life? Of course we cannot ethically do this as teachers, so what we have to do is look at the problem from a different perspective and this is to pay attention to the environmental conditions that promote creative behavior.

The early creativity research assumed creative behavior was the prerogative of creative individuals paying virtually no attention to the external conditions that promote creativity. For most of human history ordinary people and researchers alike seem to have attributed creative action to personal attributes rather than the context that promotes creative behavior. Environmental factors contributing to creativity have been largely ignored (Kasof, 1995). To use the distinction specified by Kasof creative behavior has been attributed to dispositional rather than situational causes. “The result has been a highly skewed research literature in which creativity is studied primarily by personality and cognitive psychologists searching for characteristics of ‘creative people’ and paying comparatively little attention to external influences on creativity” (Kasof, 1995).

The creative individuals in an art class are not the students that provide the art teacher with their greatest pedagogical challenges. While it is interesting, and perhaps useful, to know how one might identify a creative individual through personality traits, the major concern for the arts teacher is what to do with those individuals who are not inherently creative. These students constitute a far larger number in any given class than creative individuals. If creativity is truly an inherent trait is there anything that the teacher can do to promote creative behavior in non-creative individuals?

We will be defeated if we continue to regard creativity from the dispositional perspective of researchers who ignore the context of creativity. The most powerful reason for educators to examine context rather than disposition comes from the field of social psychology and the work of researchers such as Teresa Amabile (1982), Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1996), and Dean Keith Simonton (1979). These researchers have addressed the most pervasive misunderstanding about creativity. That is the subjective reception of a creative product. For something to be regarded as creative it must satisfy two basic criteria. First it must be original, rare, or novel in some way. Second, it must be valued by individuals in the context in which it appears. In other words it must be perceived as approved, accepted, appropriate, or "good." (Kasof, 1995).

By this definition, creativity is not purely objective and is not a fixed attribute of the creative object that holds true irrespective of its time and place. Whether or not an artistic product is creative in part requires a subjective judgment that must be conferred on the original product (Kasof, 1995; Amabile,
As such, the determination of creative artistic production becomes an issue of judgment rather than measurement. It is an assessment issue that has a profound effect upon the way art educators need to think about the development of curriculum and the assessment protocols employed for determining student learning.

The fallacy of assuming that creativity is an objective and measurable outcome of learning can have significant curriculum effects. Some art curriculums ignore the notion of creativity entirely because of misconceptions about its nature. For example, the current set of state goals in the state of Illinois (USA) does not even mention the word creativity. These goals were developed a decade ago in a climate of national testing which depends upon paper and pencil, multiple choice tests. Because it is assumed creativity cannot be effectively measured, it is ignored in this art curriculum. It is easier to test fact recall so that is what is tested. While it may be comforting at some basic level to know that students can recall facts and identify artists’ work, such assessments overlook creative performance entirely.

So what can we draw from the research that is helpful for the art teacher working with non-creative individuals? First, we can dispense with the idea that creativity is contingent upon disposition and is therefore dichotomous, i.e., that one is either creative or not. Instead, we need to focus upon the classroom conditions that facilitate creative behavior. Second, we can set up interrelated curriculum and assessment strategies that promote rather than inhibit creative outcomes, and facilitate judgment processes to determine creative outcomes in a social context.

So, what are the conditions that can help to improve creative behavior? Csikszentmihalyi (1995) is one researcher who has offered many positive suggestions for enhancing personal creativity. He interviewed nearly one hundred creative people to gain understanding about the creative process, and his recommendations have useful application in the art classroom. They include developing curiosity and interest, cultivating flow in everyday life, and ways of thinking creatively. I will discuss the implications of each of these ideas in the arts classroom context.

**Curiosity and Interest**

Csikszentmihalyi says the first step toward a more creative life is the cultivation of curiosity and interest. This seems to be an obvious suggestion but it is often one that is overlooked in the art class. How often have we seen art classes in which students are struggling with media drawing uninteresting or random objects selected by the teacher, or simply creating value scales and color wheels for the sole purpose of learning technical processes? How often
have we seen students researching the lives of long dead artists who lived in cultures that are completely foreign to the student’s experience?

I am not suggesting technical skills should not be taught, or that artists should not be studied. What is of the utmost consequence here, and what is so often overlooked, is the importance of recognizing and engaging the set of interests students bring to the classroom and from those leading to new discoveries about technique and artists from multiple cultures. Students have a considerable advantage over adults in that their curiosity is easily engaged by many things they encounter in their everyday lives. If invited to bring their interests to the classroom students will willingly oblige. But if art practice is undertaken in the absence of student interest creative production is unlikely to manifest. Interest is an essential prerequisite for creative endeavor.

Journaling and diary notes make experiences more concrete and enduring, and greatly assist students to get in touch with their interests. The point of recording one’s experience and surprises is to preserve ideas to make them less fleeting, and after time to look back in order to observe emerging patterns of interest. This is precisely the strategy employed in the International Baccalaureate (IB), diploma program which provides a good model for guidance.

**Thinking Creatively**

**Choosing a domain or themes for investigation:** In-depth pursuit of ideas related to a particular theme is a well documented hallmark of creative behavior. Themes develop from interests and provide unique lenses to view the world thus enhancing interest and providing opportunity to develop novel outcomes. Investigating a theme requires work, so there is no point investing energy in a pursuit where there is no interest or passion for discovery. For this reason some people need to explore a variety of thematic investigations before settling on something to pursue in depth.

Again I refer to the example of the international baccalaureate program which expects its students to demonstrate the capacity for independent and in-depth pursuit of ideas, both in art and about art. Here is an example of the range of themes that were investigated by a single senior class in Detroit this year.

- Growth in multiple cultures
- love and family
- religion in multiple cultures
- abuse of power
- escapism
- religious cultural and emotional safety
- cultural collision, the representation of space
- cultural relationships
These themes were developed by the students and each was independent of the others. Cultural issues appear in several of these, which is not surprising given that many of the students have come to this international school from other countries. The impact culture was a crucial issue for them. Without exception the students in this class were highly motivated and excited about their investigations.

**Problem Finding, Solutions and Risk Taking**

In the visual arts problem finding is an integral part of creative behavior. Problem-finding is also well documented in the literature of creativity and design. Both conceptual and technical problems will engage any learner. Students have most difficulty identifying conceptual problems.

Finding solutions to problems requires divergent thinking and is another essential characteristic of creative behavior. This is not so much a function of creative disposition as it is a habit of mind. Such habits of thinking can be learned but this requires an individual to consciously seek alternative solutions to a single problem, to experiment, to play, and to take risks.

I once spoke with a student who was an ice skater, showing me his work in which he represented himself in the apex of a magnificent leap above the ice. The representation of his flight through the year was graceful and elegant. The expression on his face however was a fearful grimace quite at contrast with the elegance of his pose. It was such an obvious contradiction I asked him why he had represented himself in this way. He said “I am a competition ice skater. I can never get better unless I fall down and falling down hurts! But the more I fall down the better I get”

In much the same way the experimentation of students working with ideas and media in an art class is one that requires the willingness to fall down and the freedom to take risks. As Elliot Eisner says producing novelty means one has to work at the edge of incompetence. This is risky when you don’t quite know what it is you are trying to do. Without a supportive and trusting classroom environment risk taking is not likely to occur.

**The Idea of Creative Flow**

Czikszentmihalyi is well known for the idea of flow which he suggests is the importance of developing habits of engagement with ideas that become self sustaining (p. 349). When one finds an intellectual task that is engaging it is important to be able to pursue it with enthusiasm and sustained interest.

The average school is a very poor place in which to develop creative flow. The structure of a normal school day conspires against the development of any sustained pursuit of creative activity or other kind of intellectual engagement for
that matter. In most schools lessons are divided into short time periods of 40 to 80 minutes during which it is scarcely possible for students to collect their materials, let alone their thoughts, in order to generate an idea and begin work. No sooner do they get started the bell sounds and they have to return their materials and move from one classroom to another and repeat the same process over again with a different subject matter. In the course of the day most students start and stop their lessons between five and eight times. Imagine the frustration when one discovers something of interest he or she may wish to pursue only to have to shut down and start something else.

Compared to the intellectual staccato students experience in school, opportunities for out of school visual and intellectual stimulation represent a veritable landscape of treasures. When students can experience the abundance of imagery offered through television, video games, movies, billboards, magazines, the Internet, concerts, exhibitions, community events, and even their phone, it is no wonder they lose interest in school.

There are no easy answers to this problem given the structural limitations of school administration. However, I have seen some hope in the work of gifted teachers who are able to construct the art learning experience as an integral part of the students’ life at school. Once interest is engaged in the classroom these teachers encourage students to return during free periods, recesses, lunchtime, and even after the official school day ends. These classrooms are always populated and there is a buzz of excitement among the students in the room.

At one school I saw in Frankfort, Germany the teacher and her students frequently worked with soapstone so the floor was always covered in white dust. It was easy to identify the art room as center of activity because the corridors throughout the school were covered in white footprints becoming more and more dense as they converged at the art room door. Other teachers in school complained to me that the students spent too much time in the art room, and even cut math and science classes to work on their art projects.

At another International Baccalaureate school in New Mexico students live on campus and so do the teachers. The art teacher at that school told me that he cannot keep the art students out of the art room. They return during the day and consistently stay well into the evening. Almost every night he has to visit the room late in the evening and even into the early morning to send the students to their rooms to sleep. Even then they return after he leaves and continue working.

In both these cases students are experiencing exciting engagement with ideas because their teachers have set up appropriate physical and intellectual conditions, an atmosphere of trust, and the freedom to work in supportive classroom spaces beyond the normal classroom hours. The work of students in both these schools is extraordinary. A feature of the programs is a personal visual diary called the Research Workbook in which students develop their
themes and connect their life experiences with the pursuit of artistic expression. These books are intimately connected with the studio work. Developing creative flow is a subtle and sometimes complicated endeavor. It has to do with capitalizing upon existing interests, encouraging students to connect their inside school lives with outside everyday experience. In essence students connect school art experience with their lives as a whole, thus enabling "flow" to develop and maintain its force.

**The Role of Assessment in Fostering Creative Behavior**

I want to return now to a comment I made it the beginning of this paper. While it is true that for someone to create a work of art that they must engage in a creative act, it is not true that students who study a subject called art will necessarily develop the capacity for creative thought. In fact it may well be the case that the opposite is true largely because of the kind of assessment practices employed in schools.

Why is this the case? If we know what situational conditions are likely to promote creative behavior then it makes sense to develop assessment strategies that enhance those conditions rather than negate them. For example we know creative behavior is more likely to occur if curiosity is fostered, if students are encouraged to pursue interests thematically, if they are prepared to play with ideas and engage in risk taking behavior in the search for solutions to problems, and if physical conditions support the idea of creative" flow" described by Czikszentmihalyi.

I have long argued in support of the use of portfolios as an assessment tool, (Boughton, 2006; Boughton & Wang, 2005; Boughton, 2004; Boughton & Wang, 2002, Boughton, 1996) because good portfolios do more than provide evidence for assessment. They drive curriculum in such a way that creative engagement is more likely. A good portfolio will demand students to demonstrate their interests and show the ways in which they have integrated classroom learning with their lives. A good portfolio will require in-depth and sustained reflection, and will provide a good opportunity to engage interest through the pursuit of thematic content. For a portfolio to have the best chance of becoming a living record of students' creative thinking less assessment is better than more. When a portfolio is formally assessed the criteria should include the requirement for evidence of student interest, systematic, sustained and individual pursuit of ideas, evidence of risk taking,

The way to destroy creativity through inappropriate assessment is to structure the art program as a series of directed projects that always receive a grade leaving no possibility for a collection of work to be judged as a record of thinking. If the teacher always chooses the topic, the media, the visual references, the reference sources, the strategy, the style of representation, and the look of the potential outcome where is the opportunity for student interests to
be engaged? Why would a student take risks the search for solutions when he or she knows they will be graded on every project they do? Every outcome needs to be a winner! Where is the opportunity for students to pursue a theme? Instead, assessment practices that require thematic study, that do not assess each project, that require evidence of productive risk taking, demand evidence of sustained independent investigation are more likely to encourage creative output.

My final point is to return to the essence of the argument about creativity. Creativity is not measurable, it is something that is determined by judgment in a social context. It does not make sense to ignore the significance of collective judgment about artistic production. There are some good models to guide us with this process. Assessment by students of their colleagues work, and self-assessment within a community context, both help to address the perennial problem of determining the creative quality of artistic products. Moderation processes employed in many countries in the world at the senior school level, and also by the International Baccalaureate program Diploma Program go some way towards addressing the need for community determination of the value of art products, and whether or not they contain evidence of creative thinking.

In the United States the mandates of district, state, and national school systems for at least the last twenty years in have increasingly demanded that accountability is demonstrated through testing. The pressure to demonstrate accountability is extreme and teachers are pressured to produce grades on a regular basis to satisfy the demands of administrators and parent groups even in the case where art is not tested with multiple choice exams. In the art class this pressure has had the effect of working directly against the development of strategies to enhance creative behavior in art students.

Assessment against the measure of standards has afflicted math, reading and the sciences more particularly than the arts. However the search for ways to achieve predictable and agreed standards in the arts deflects attention away from the search for creative outcomes and the exercise of imagination in our students’ art making efforts. Failure to distinguish between standards and standardization in the practice of assessing art destroys the likelihood that students will experience the curricular conditions necessary to stimulate creative thought. It is time to move back towards a more rational relationship between the creative outcomes we desire the methods we use to assess it.
References


