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Creativity and Learning: Partners in Pedagogy

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The students shuffle into class, donning their large drawing boards and tool boxes stuffed with supplies. They find a space to unpack their belongings and prepare to draw, discussing amongst themselves the weekend and their latest adventures. Being the "instructor" of Drawing I, I arrive a little early to greet them and prepare for our meeting, setting up the still-life and adjusting the lights. I then say a few words about the goals of today's work–the method, technique, and other considerations–and start the cassette player. The instrumental music shifts the tone of the class-room to silence. No more discussion occurs–there is no sound other than the music and the scratching of charcoal on newsprint. It is as if students move closer inward, somehow closer to themselves. After a few minutes, I begin to walk around the room and observe their progress–my eyes being perceived as lasers burning into their souls, somehow exposing their every thought and deed. Cognizant of their sensitivity and the risk-taking involved in these first few steps of the drawings, I offer a few words to the entire class–providing encouragement or trying to translate a framework that might prove helpful in getting started. A few more leisurely laps around the room and I start to approach individual students about their drawing, asking questions and offering suggestions. When I merely stoop down to get a better look at one student (Ruth's) drawing, the embarrass-ment and excuses start to flow, "I'm really not good at this kind of thing. I don't know what I'm doing." Suddenly it seems awkward that I have become involved in the work Ruth has begun, as if I have interrupted a conversation that was taking place inside of her. I ignore her standard, self-conscious response (although curious about it) and begin to talk with her about building on the structure she has created, or help her redefine her structure.

My curiosity about creativity and learning has sprung from similar experiences to this one. Too often in art classes at the college level I have heard surprising comments from students about "ability." "I'm not really good at this kind of thing" or "I'm not really a creative person" are apolo-getic disclaimers I would hear practically every day. By the end of a semester course, confidence would be higher and I would hear these statements less and less; the comments became more about how surprised they were with themselves, a sense of shock that they may have had some "ability" after all. My growing perplexity about these issues led me to want to better understand students and their personal development. After all, there must be a way to identify the origins of these assumptions, and there must be a way to influence the "system" that perpetuates them. This paper will focus on the latter; it is an effort to splay creativity over the framework of education; to see how creativity "fits" into learning and has potential to enlighten, inform, and contribute to students' capabilities in the classroom and beyond. I am suggesting here that learning be retooled to include the social and affective as well as the intellectual. Robert Kegan (1994) calls these dimensions "interpersonal" (social), "intrapersonal" (self), and "cognitive" (intellectual) and elaborates on their connection:

It should be clear that when I refer to "mind" or "mental" or "knowing" I am not referring to thinking processes alone. 1 am referring to the person's meaning-constructive or meaning-organizational capacities. I am referring to the selective, interpretive, executive, construing capacities that psychologists have historically associated with the "ego" or the "self." I look at people as the active organizers of their experience. ... This kind of "knowing," this work of the mind, is not about "cognition" alone, if what we mean by cognition is thinking divorced

from feeling and social relating. It is about the organizing principle we bring to our thinking and our feelings and our relating to others and our relating to parts of ourselves. (p. 29)

Assumptions about meaning making should include the myriad of ways individuals construct and mediate the world around them. I aim to explore what educators and practitioners have sought and discovered regarding the process of teaching and learning and further explain the potential creativity has to aid in the challenges of education. Definitions of some key words/concepts that will be used throughout this paper are essential first. Second, I will share some existing ideas about the learning process, presenting traditional education and its limitations and the need that is evident for recognizing different (creative) ways of learning and knowing. Finally, I will propose some possibilities for practical application in the classroom that hold promise for transforming current educational systems. I expect the ideas in this paper to "plant a seed" in the hearts of educators–for creativity to be nourished, grow, and flourish under the auspices of a contemporary, inclusive pedagogy. My request to educators is to view teaching and learning through "new eyes," eyes that have compassionate vision to promote individual student "portraits" to emerge and abound in the classroom. As educators, we need to empower students by providing them with creative tools so that they may be able to contribute in a society that demands creative solutions.

Defining Creativity

What is it to be *creative*? Indeed, you will receive a different response from every person you ask. Webster's College Dictionary (1991) defines creativity as: "1) the state or quality of being creative, 2) the ability to create meaningful new forms, interpretations, etc.; originality, 3) the process by which one utilizes creative ability" (p. 319). An interesting selection of words: *quality, ability, originality, process, meaning, interpretation.* What meaning do these terms hold for different individuals? How are these ideas measured? Who have these capabilities? How does one gain these attributes? I realize it is not possible to draw distinct lines around these notions and answer these questions completely, but perhaps some shapes will emerge simply by charting a "dotted line" of understanding. We can learn from "pieces" of the "whole" we encounter and these pieces sketch a "picture" for us. Though the picture may be fuzzy, its composition changing and moving daily, these glimpses provide great insight.

Defining Learning

What is learning? Patricia King (1996) explores its meaning:

Learning is sometimes regarded as synonymous with education ("to be a learned person") and knowledge ("book learning"). Learning defined–as an *outcome*–includes the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that serve as a foundation for wisdom. Learning defined as a *process,* on the other hand, focuses on the kinds of strategies people use to solve new problems, how they respond to feedback and new information, how they gather and interpret data, how they determine its relevance, and how strong the evidence needs to be before they are satisfied that they can make a decision or solve a problem. (p. 219)

The traditional method of teaching has centered around the teacher and left students passively receiving knowledge from authorities–what Paulo Freire (1993) calls the "banking" method.

The scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits ... knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves

knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as a process of inquiry. (p. 53)

By "projecting ignorance" onto students, educators oppress students as human beings, disallow their voices, and prohibit creativity.

Further emphasizing learning as an active process, Ira Shor (1992) writes,

By limiting creative and critical questioning, the banking model makes education into an authoritarian transfer instead of a democratic experience. Any material imposed by authority as doctrine stops being knowledge and becomes dogma. Critical learning and democratic education end where orthodoxy begins. (p. 34)

Shor here describes critical questioning and critical learning as a democratic process, a process that should not be limited to one perspective.

A traditional educator might claim that creativity and logic have a somewhat adversarial relationship; personal expression has no real place in the classroom. On the contrary, Ernest Boyer (1995) contends:

All people on the planet respond to the aesthetic. Every child has the urge and capacity to be expressive. It is tragic that for most children the universal language of the arts is suppressed, then destroyed, in the early years of learning, because traditional teaching does not favor self-expression and school boards consider art a frill. This is an ironic deprivation when the role of art in developing critical thinking is becoming more widely recognized. (p. 20)

Boyer is implying that expression and critical thinking are inextricably linked and that education is a suppressor of such expression; therefore a suppressor of critical thinking as well. Does this mean that some students, finding that their expressions are "invalid" in the classroom, are silenced? Does this mean that some students will be halted in their development due to lack of support by their teachers? Might these students often be categorized as "underachievers" and "daydreamers" and their learning styles mistaken as a lack of capacity to achieve understanding? Do these students end up working at jobs that are below their intellectual potential? My fear is that the answer to all these questions is a resounding YES. Albert Einstein was often considered a "poor student" by academia's standards.

Einstein (in Gardner, 1993) emphasized the important role played by imagining and fantasizing: "When I examine myself and my methods of thought I come to the conclusion that *the gift of fantasy has meant more to me than my talent for absorbing positive knowledge*" (p. 105) [Emphasis added].

How often is creative fantasy, this crucial activity to Einstein's learning style, part of higher education's curriculum? Or is it squelched so early in life (as Boyer claims) that creativity is uncomfortable and foreign to students by the time they reach college? It seems the most reasonable solution to the problem of misunderstanding (and underestimating) students like Einstein who have *not* lost their value of creative activity would be to transform the "system." Thankfully, the revolution that has occurred and is occurring in educational practice due to a rejection of these

traditional methods is a shift toward centering learning around teacher/learner interaction. Expression and experience are given a forum for relating students to their learning, setting the stage for the use of creativity in the classroom as a means for creating these connections.

Theoretical Foundations for Merging Learning and Creativity

As many of the a priori assumptions about traditional teaching have been brought into question, so have the ways in which educators approach students' ways of making meaning. A broad, sweeping theory about human learning is no longer acceptable. Howard Gardner has defined "intellectual strengths or competencies," what he calls "multiple intelligences," that appreciate diverse ways of making meaning and places them on equal ground. Gardner describes an intelligence as "the human ability to solve problems or to make something that is valued in one or more cultures," (Checkley, 1997, p. 8) and claims his criteria for an intelligence is based on biological evidence of the ability in the brain and cultural influences on ways of thinking. Gardner (1983) states,

> In its strong form, multiple intelligence theory posits a small set of human intellectual potentials ... of which all individuals are capable by virtue of their membership in the human species. Owing to heredity, early training, or, in all probability, a constant interaction between these factors, some individuals will develop certain intelligences far more than others; but every normal individual should develop each intelligence to some extent, given but a modest opportunity to do so. (p. 278)

The eight intelligences developed by Gardner are: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist. Gardner suggests that each person has potential for each intelligence (see *Frames of Mind*, Gardner, 1983, for details); it is those intelligences which are *cultivated* that become apparent. This notion supports the continuing argument that education needs to accommodate students' unique ways of learning and view creativity as a partner in the learning process.

Educators also need to consider the ways in which students have been *socialized:* how gender, culture, environmental factors, and individual "style" have had an effect on learning. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) found that meaning making procedures differed among people. The processes they describe came to be called "connected" and "separate" knowing. The authors provide further clarification:

> By *understanding* we mean something akin to the German word *kennen,* the French *connaitre,* the Spanish *conocer,* or the Greek *gnosis* (Lewis, 1983), implying personal acquaintance with an object (usually but not always a person). Understanding involves intimacy and equality between self and object, while *knowledge (wissen, savior, saber)* implies separation from the object and mastery over it. (p. 101)

This work sent a new message to educators–that we must consider and better understand the ways our students make meaning for it to be possible to reach them in the classroom and promote their development. Although a student with a separate *or* connected preference could work and think in creative ways, we must try to think about how they might go about doing so. Separate knowers objectify and eliminate personal feeling from their meaning making, and it is this form of reasoning that is traditionally referred to as thinking "critically." Connected knowing is deeply rooted in the subjective and is marked by trying to understand others' points of view (step into

another's shoes, if you will). Thus, it would probably be a reasonable assumption to think that separate knowers and connected knowers might respond to problem-solving in very different ways. A more separate learner might see creativity (in an art class, for example) as the process of copying a masterwork; learning the skills and techniques the artist used. A more connected learner, however, might be more interested in understanding the artist, what (s)he was feeling when the piece of art was created, what emotion was expressed through the use of color, why (s)he chose the subject, and the intention the artist had in creating the work. Separate knowing has been encouraged and perpetuated through traditional teaching methods for centuries. In an attempt to define "critical thinking" in a new (and inclusive) way to include those that are connected knowers, the educational renewal of which I speak would balance the scales between the two preferences. Obviously, ability to employ *both* modes is necessary for students to be able to participate successfully in a complex, contemporary society.

Finally, equally important to understanding dimensions within the human mind and students' interactions with others is understanding the culture(s) of which students are members. Meaning-making cannot be separate from the culture that assists in manifesting it. Jerome Bruner (1996), in proposing a new "cultural psychology" says,

> You cannot understand mental activity unless you take into account the cultural setting and its resources, the very things that give mind its shape and scope. Learning, remembering, talking, imagining: all of them are made possible by participating in a culture. (preface X-XI)

In the classroom, educators have an opportunity to offer a guarded space in which students can take risks, explore, and be creative. Bruner (1996) refers to the educational process as a "complex pursuit of fitting a culture to the needs of its members and of fitting its members and their ways of knowing to the needs of the culture" (p. 43). This "fitting" is indeed complex, as well as sloppy, messy, and slippery at times, but it *is* possible to achieve. It should include assessing where students are in their development and "building bridges" to places they could be. It is our job as educators to meet students where they are and walk *with* them on their journey of discovery. Robert Kegan (1994) develops this bridge metaphor:

> We [educators] cannot simply stand on our favored side of the bridge and worry or fume about the many who have not yet passed over. A bridge must be well anchored on both sides, with as much respect for where it begins as for where it ends. (p. 62)

Possibilities for Practice

The looming question then becomes what can be done to begin the colossal task of educational transformation? I believe it will take those involved in education attempting to look through new eyes at students and their ways of learning.

Back in my Drawing I class, Ruth sits quietly with a puzzled look on her face. Her page only contains a few hesitant strokes, but she is already frustrated. l can read in her expression that she does not know what question to ask or how to ask it, so I begin talking with her about her work. "Tell me a little about what you'd like to do with this drawing today, Ruth," I say. We chat for a while, doodling together in the corner of her paper; exploring possibilities. Hearing that she is a fan of Impressionism, I retreat to my office to locate a book with reproductions of some well-known works. I ask her to consider what it is about Impressionism that appeals to her and what she

thinks could be improved upon in these examples. She looks through the book and returns to her drawing–meanwhile, I talk with a few more students. As I approach her again, she has a page of the book open next to her drawing board, which holds a magnificent drawing of the still life with the softness of form often found in Impressionism, yet punctuated with a few selectively placed bold strokes. She tells me that she likes the way Monet's paintings are willowy and wanted her drawing to have a similar treatment of shapes, but wanted to add some strong lines for contrast; to make her own "statement."

Taking a break to stretch, Ruth walks around the room and sees the many varied responses to the same still life she had been drawing. An in-progress critique ensues; students share how they developed their ideas and offer one another comments about composition and style or suggestions based on their own struggles and successes with the materials.

This example illustrates three principles for practice designed by Marcia Baxter Magolda (1992). By my attempt to *validate Ruth as a knower* and *situate learning in her own experience,* Ruth has come to understand that instead of a "blank slate" she holds a cache of references and experiences to draw upon for her work in any class. She is encouraged to view herself as a creator of ideas versus a passive receiver of them–she enacted this by responding to a "masterwork" in a way that was more meaningful to her. *Defining learning as mutually constructing meaning* expects that no one individual is responsible for learning; it is a shared group endeavor. If Ruth is treated as an equal partner in learning by her teacher and peers, this frees her from the restraints imposed by her former narrow view of what constitutes "good drawing" and could have a profound effect on her ways of making meaning in any situation.

The potential for complex thinking emerging from students mutually constructing meaning, integrating others' ideas with their own, and drawing connections between different concepts is inspiring and, by virtue of the process, CREATIVE.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Research

The most viable solution to answering the call of developing students in multiple ways is found in integrated learning. What I am suggesting is that we (educators, administrators, student affairs professionals, staff members, etc.) shift our ways of thinking to understand the student as a whole person; each dimension (the social, emotional, and intellectual) not fully separate from the other, but interdependent. Additionally, a consideration that needs spotlighting is this notion of creativity as a potential vehicle to promote self-authorship. Too little is known about the link of creativity to personal agency, and it is my belief that there exists powerful hope in this link for future generations of students and lifelong learners. Pleas for more information and consideration in this area are evident, as studies have shown that students who have participated in the arts often score higher on the SAT than those who have not (MENC, 1997). Also,

In 1991 ... the U.S. Department of Labor published its report *What Work Requires of Schools,* listing the skills, competencies and habits deemed crucial for workforce success by American business. The President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities in its 1997 report, *Creative America,* argues that many of those skills are essential components of arts education: thinking creatively, making decisions and solving problems among them. (Goals 2000 Arts Education Partnership, 1997, p. 8)

Creative activity may likely provide a needed component in preparing students for responsibilities they will face in their work lives. This information affirms the growing need for reassessment of educational directives and exposes just a fragment of the educational potential in creativity. Hope for education's future, indeed, partly lies in the partnership between creativity and learning in pedagogy.

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Author's Note: The reason I am so very concerned about and invested in issues regarding different ways of knowing and making meaning (and am convinced of their importance for practice) is that my ways of knowing are different than what has traditionally been valued in education. I am an advocate for multiple forms of expression in the classroom due to time spent in school, interacting in education, and having to conform to expectations of expression and sensibilities that ideally do not match my own. Although I have had some success making my own opportunities for creativity out of the framework I am asked to work within, I think many others like me are either unable to compromise or do not know how to do so. Just writing this paper is a tremendous challenge—my thoughts (in the form of images, abstractions, and links) must be translated to even be able to make it onto the page. While I do not believe the answer lies in eliminating the framework we must work within, *I do* believe the framework should be reconstructed to reflect (and more importantly, *celebrate)* those that think in complex and unique ways.