
Playing, Creativity, Possibility

BY OLIVIA GUDE

Trust in the inexhaustible character of the murmur.
—André Breton, Manifeste du Surréalisme, 1926

Why is it sometimes so difficult for teachers to create conditions that support the emergence of creative behavior and surprising images? Although virtually all contemporary art teachers list “enhancing creativity” as a key desired outcome of their programs, analysis of lesson plans used in schools suggests that in practice very little curriculum is specifically geared to developing creative abilities. We must question the assumption that any art project will cultivate creative behaviors and then develop projects whose methods support core objectives for quality creativity curriculum such as stimulating free ideation, encouraging experimental approaches to making, and supporting students in identifying and manifesting deeply felt idiosyncratic experiences.
Act 1: Anxiety

"I don't know what to do," Jane responds when told to get down to work. "It's easy," the teacher says for the 27th time today. "Just think of things that don't go together and put them in your painting." The student whines, "I can't think of anything." The frustrated (and exhausted) teacher offers a plethora of suggestions that are each met with a disconsolate sigh.

In my first draft of the above paragraph, I described the student as listless—"showing or having no interest in anything, spiritless" (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971). As I re-read my description, I realized that I strongly identified with the experience of the overworked, discouraged teacher and not with the internal experience of the student. The student is not lazy or spiritless, but the student is dispirited, without the spirit of fearless exploration needed to make art.

Though she has been told that there is not one right answer to an art project, the student doesn't know how to judge what kind of solution will be acceptable. She doesn't even consider that the final product might be personally meaningful because this has not been her experience of schoolwork in art or in other classes. She doesn't understand the purpose of making such a project and yet she will be judged on how well she completes it.

The teacher is dispirited too. She longs to be the sort of teacher who presides over a classroom of excited and engaged students. She wants to live up to her memories of teachers who inspired her—she wants to be more supportive than the boring, spirit-destroying art teachers she occasionally encountered. This teacher is frustrated and disappointed—when she was a student and had a chance at this sort of artistic freedom she was exhilarated. The teacher begins to concentrate on the few students who are having a great time and tries not to think too much about those who are dutifully daubing paint on the offhandedly-sketched ideas the teacher has eked out for each of them. Both teacher and student are feeling anxiety—uneasiness, apprehension, psychic tension.

A few weeks later, the teacher surveys the few fabulous-looking, realistically rendered Daliesque paintings and the many laconically finished works that lack visual excitement or psychological depth. It suddenly occurs to the teacher that there is an uncanny similarity between the descriptions of these "not so good" paintings and how she has come to view many of the "not so good" students. The very young people whose passionate emotions and intense energy first drew her to the field of teaching now seem to lack depth and seem not at all excited about making meaning in their lives. The teacher sadly concludes that given such attitudes in "today's youth" she can't be the inspiring teacher she had hoped to be.

Yet, a teacher's complaining about the students' characteristics is like a chemist complaining about the physical properties of elements. The students are who they are. How do we as teachers meet students in their present psychological state and engage them in transformative experiences? How can a busy public school teacher respond to individual needs for support in developing deeply personal creative behaviors within a collective, common curriculum?

Act 2: Resistance

Several teenagers and a teacher are gathered around a table looking at a multi-branched inkblot on a dampened piece of paper. "What do you see?" asks the teacher. "I don't see nothing in that mess," a young gentleman snappily responds. The others laugh and concur. "Yeah, that ain't nothing." A more subdued young man, too polite to mock the teacher, notes the less shakes his head in disbelief and softly murmurs, "I don't know what you want me to see..."

"Let your mind flow, just stare at the image," the teacher prompts. "Now I see a large lizard carrying a tulip in his mouth." The boys laugh and assert that the teacher is "just plain crazy."

Why do students sometimes prefer almost any activity—staring out the window, chatting, throwing small balls of clay, painting fingernails, doing homework—to artmaking? Why do some students actively resist opportunities for constructive creative play?

To engage in making art, one must begin by surrendering to the process of making. Whethier playing with colors, inventing dance steps, or jotting down poetry on paper, the artist must paradoxically "lighten up" and "get serious" at the same time. An artist must make a commitment to actively and seriously engaging the materials and forms at hand while simultaneously remaining loose and experimental.

It can be difficult to step back and consider the many sources of students' resistances. In the example above, the young men were good-naturedly united in their unwillingness to engage in creative play, but each of their reasons was quite different. The young man who wants to see what the teacher wants him to see is anxious to be perceived as good. For him being good means not questioning authority, staying within perceived boundaries of appropriate thought and action.

Surrender to an internally generated creative self may mean that he finds himself outside of the comforting constraints of conformity.

Other students may have different reasons for resisting creative engagement. One student may be reluctant to jeopardize his status as a good realist artist by making "childish-looking" art; another student, with hip hop-inspired awareness of the political implications of art and music may consider the activities in this art class to be irrelevant to the real issues of his community. Other students may have been shamed by parents or peers for being too dreamy, not focused enough on the practical aspects of surviving in a tough neighborhood or of growing up and making a living.

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 for incipient creative urges to be nurtured, rather than being denied and smothered.
Act Three: Cultivating Creativity

A co-teacher, sensing group resistance building against the planned project, wanders over. "Oh, you see a lizard? Yes, I guess I see that, but what I really see is this mountain with a house and a man climbing ... I think he's carrying something heavy ..." The teachers exchange more comments about what they are seeing—enjoying each other's increasingly detailed and outlandish observations.

An attractive girl offers her opinion. Now a few of the boys get interested. "You see that?" the tallest boy asks. "Oh, yeah, I see that too and a warrior..." says a formerly resistant young man. He's met with good-natured derision from friends, but also with requests to point out the ninja and his accompanying flame-spouting panther.

Soon most of the students are offering descriptions of what they each see in the inkblot—sometimes building on each other's observations, sometimes taking the conversation in a new direction. Now everyone in the classroom is getting interested—if even these "bad boys" are excited about this new, weird game, maybe there is something to it after all.

Teachers can readily list many conditions that inhibit the development of creativity in students—self-consciousness in front of peers, over-scheduling that doesn't leave time for creative daydreaming, hours spent immersed in passively watching TV or actively playing video games, schools that focus on getting the one right answer, and a society that judges success on standardized test scores and the size of bank accounts. Art educators assume that at least a partial corrective to these creativity-inhibiting conditions can be readily found in the curriculum of an average art classroom. Is this actually the case? Do attempts to articulate the components of quality art education often fail to identify and support well-documented conditions that foster creative behavior?

Today's content standards for arts education reinforce a tendency to overlook actual processes associated with creative behavior. These standards are inventories of content (such as media and formalist vocabulary) and sometimes contain mechanisms of instrumental creativity (i.e. methods and activities for finding solutions to problems posed by someone else). The standards do not represent the deep experiences of immersion, wonder, and not knowing that are described by creative individuals. Lists of standards, with their
Inkblot Portraits by Chicago youth artists. String wet with ink was placed on paper and the paper was then folded in half producing Rorschach-like blots. It is probably biologically coded that humans are inclined to see living creatures in bi-laterally symmetrical forms. The teens were amazed at the wide variety of portraits generated by a similar beginning. Seeing their own startling multiplicity of imagination cultivates students’ awe and respect for each other’s creative capacity. Portrait of a Young Artist group, Spiral Workshop 2001.

Principles of Possibility

- Playing
- Forming Self
- Investigating
- Community Themes
- Encountering Difference
- Attentive Living
- Empowered Experiencing
- Empowered Making
- Deconstructing Culture
- Reconstructing Social Spaces
- Not Knowing

Emphasis on conscious intentionality, are at odds with the characteristics of actual quality artworks, which embody a holistic complexity that is not reducible to the sum of the parts (During, 2005; Garoian, 1999; Kant, 1790/1977). Thus, standards as currently written do little to foster consideration of the sorts of experiences that can empower students to be aware of and act on internal knowing and experiencing.

In his classic book, On Becoming a Person, Carl Rogers (1961) summarized circumstances that promote personal growth and self-actualization. Rogers described two major conditions that foster creativity—psychological safety and psychological freedom. He identifies three components that cultivate psychological safety: (1) “Accepting the individual as of unconditional worth;” (2) “Providing a climate in which external evaluation is absent;” and (3) “Understanding empathically” (pp. 357-358). Psychological freedom is rooted in trusting that freedom of expression will result in thoughtful outcomes, a climate in which positive people take seriously the responsibility for what they say and make.

I believe that most art teachers sincerely want to provide a safe place that promotes free artistic exploration. However, there is a general misapprehension that a teacher’s wish to create a safe, creative psychological space will necessarily generate this experience for students. Conditions of psychological safety and freedom that make creativity possible are produced, not merely by the teacher’s wishes, but rather by how his or her attitude manifests itself in the range of choices that affect course content, work styles, class discussions, peer interactions, opportunities for playful engagement with materials and ideas, and assessment or the lack thereof.

By carefully re-considering values, priorities, curriculum, and daily practices, it is possible to change the climate of the classroom. Rogers’ description of the psychological safety that allows creativity to emerge emphasizes creating a climate in which the individual’s experience is valued and understood, a climate in which the individual is not judged for how well he/she meets a pre-determined model of process or product.
Accessing the Creativity of the Unconscious Mind

As we develop the curriculum content for Spiral Workshop, the University of University of Illinois at Chicago Saturday art program for teens, we keep in mind the Principles of Possibility, a list that articulates important components of a comprehensive art education experience—Playing, Forming Self, Investigating Community Themes, Encountering Difference, Attentive Living, Empowered Experiencing, Empowered Making, Deconstructing Culture, Reconstructing Social Spaces, Not Knowing (Gude, 2007). Playing, a necessary component of any creative process, is the first (and foundational) principle of the possibilities that can emerge from a quality art curriculum. Though Spiral curriculum is structured to investigate complex themes and to introduce students to sophisticated contemporary art practices, we begin our work with an affirmation of the creative capacity of each participant.

The first day in every Spiral Workshop group is designated as a Surrealist Play Day, a day of projects designed to extend students' capacities for focused and playful engagement. These introductory activities are based on the many games and collaborative activities utilized by the original Surrealist artists and poets to open themselves to new avenues of thinking and making (Breton, 1934/1997; Brotchie, 1995; Nadeau, 1944/1989). These activities can be thought of as remedial education for all whose creative capacities have been damaged by too much time in dehumanizing and overly regimented educational systems.

Surrealist artists sought to catch the unconscious mind unawares and capture the images of the unfettered imagination. As any working artist knows, it is not always easy to summon up a creative spirit on demand. Thus, simply telling students that this is their "creative time" does not necessarily result in focused, creative activity.

Creativity curriculum at Spiral continues to evolve, but there are some activities that have become regular favorites. The most versatile exercise is the activity of looking for images in the random stimuli of blots and stains, a process described by Max Ernst as "seeing into" (Bradley, 1997, p. 23): André Breton (1997) explained, "What fascinated us was the possibility ... of escaping the constraints that weigh on supervised thoughts" (p. 62).

This activity cultivates an ability to consciously alter one's perception in order to access other ways of seeing and knowing. It allows a creative maker to foster awareness of the intertwining of the outer world and inner consciousness.

Exquisite Characters.

Fourth-grade students of Medgar Evers Elementary School played the classic Exquisite Corpse collaborative drawing game. Because so many public school students had been killed in Chicago that year, we decided to change the name of the project to Exquisite Characters. 2002.

Surrealist Character Collages in which chance plays a role in image choice lead to more finished works in which oil pastel is layered onto and then scraped off the shiny surface of a magazine collage. By Tia Briticevich in the Imprinted group, Spiral Workshop 2001.
Spiral Workshop teachers have experimented with many different materials to create the smears and smudges that form the basis of our "Seeing Into" investigations—including coffee, bleach, and smoke. "Seeing Into" can be used to encourage conceptual as well as visual play. Considering a red stain on a paper, the students discuss images that each sees. They are then told that the stain is actually blood (or red earth or raspberry juice) and then discuss whether this knowledge suggests different associations. Students thus also learn to think in metaphor, to play with a range of signifiers and associations.

Another favorite Spiral Workshop play activity is collaboratively making visual and verbal Exquisite Corpse® projects. Writing Poems of Opposites and writing questions for unseen answers are other Surrealist word games that encourage students to be playful in generating texts and images and thoughtful in considering the unexpected outcomes of their own creative process (Brotchie, 1995; Nadeau, 1944/1989). From such activities, students learn to be willing to "jump right in" to creative experimentation and then to slow down and consider what has been made. Students learn that in most creative work a large percentage of initial ideas and images are discarded as the maker searches for the spark that will make a sustained artistic investigation worthwhile.

**Internalizing Understanding of the Creative Process**

As well as giving students opportunities to engage in creative play—both playful making and playful interpretation—it is important to encourage their capacities to make nuanced observations of inner experiences as they engage in creative work. Carl Rogers described three characteristics of the creative experience (1961). He labels the initial characteristic "Eureka!" the feeling that this is really it.

Surprisingly, a second characteristic that often accompanies the surprise and pleasure of the Eureka experience of recognition and acceptance is the experience of "the anxiety of separateness." (Rogers, 1961, p. 356). Anxiety is a necessary component of a truly creative experience. How do we as teachers recognize and support our students as they struggle with the anxiety of being deeply engaged with a creative pursuit that is becoming increasingly personal and encompassing? As fellow travelers in the creative process we must acknowledge the dilemma, the potential for suffering, and provide a calm witnessing and emotional acceptance that allows students to manage their anxieties and move forward in the process. Discussing and sharing these to-be-expected emotional consequences of creative activity prepares students to accept the complexity of emerging feelings within the self and as manifested by other members of their creative community.

A final quality suggested by Rogers is that creative experience results in the "wish to communicate" (1961, p. 356). How can teachers meet this desire for meaningful interpersonal communication? How can we re-think closure activities so that they are not focused on critique or valuation by an authority, but on sharing among peers?

**Considerations for Creating Creative People**

Often art educators attempt to sell the importance of art education by emphasizing its role in developing the creative capacities of individuals. Creativity is conceived of as pertaining, not merely to the domain of making art, but also to living a constructive, meaningful life.

Rogers described three characteristics of constructively creative people (1961). It's important for the field of art education to develop goals, specific objectives, and curricula that foster these core characteristics: (1) the ability to play, (2) openness to experience, and (3) an inner locus of evaluation. Although it may seem counterintuitive, a creativity curriculum must be structured to teach methods and practices of playing with elements and concepts.

In a typical Surrealist Painting project, students are shown works by artists such as Salvador Dalí, René Magritte, or Frida Kahlo—artists who depict unusual combinations of images in a realist style. Activities that promote making many playful juxtapositions and interpretations before settling into making a finished painting are rarely included in art curricula. Paradoxically, rather than promoting well-documented core values of the Surrealist movement (Alexandrian, 1969/1970; Foster, 1993), most of the work time is spent on valuing and practicing skills in realist painting.

The primary objective of a creativity curriculum ought to be developing the capacity of students to instinctively respond to situations with playful creative behaviors. This objective should not be undermined by simultaneously attempting to teach other skills that will inhibit the free flow of ideas. Incorporating the learning of disparate skills within such a project may cramp behaviors and qualities that are stated as primary goals for a creativity curriculum because a student's experience of focused experimentation is interrupted when strictures such as "demonstrate crosshatching in your finished work" or "you must use cool colors in the background and warm colors in the foreground" impinge on a student's intuitive choice-making.

**Ghost of My Friend**, a Surrealist Game in which each youth artist wrote his or her name with wet ink. The blot resulting from folding the paper became the basis for creating a spontaneously generated alter-ego character. By Sylwia Stronowicz in the Subversive Identity, Breaking Culture Codes group, Spiral Workshop 2005.
Another characteristic of creative people suggested by Rogers is their openness to experience. Creative individuals develop a deeply rooted trust in their own capacity to generate surprising solutions. Even as they experience the anxiety of creative exploration, they are grounded in a realistic belief (based on personal experience) that surrender to the creative process may produce surprising, useful, stimulating results. This openness to experience is manifested in the willingness of a creative individual to suspend judgment and to consider emerging images and ideas from various perspectives.

As one reads through the many descriptions of the philosophies and activities of the Surrealist artists and poets, one is struck by their passionate belief in the capacity of the human mind to generate tradition-shattering, marvelous imagery and ideas. (Breton, 1952/1993; Nadeau, 1944/1989). Rogers describes this quality as possessing an "internal locus of evaluation," the strength to trust one's own process and perceptions, however different from socially accepted norms.

As I consider the importance of a creative person's inner focus and self-trust, I think about the increasing demands for monitoring and assessment in the field of art education. While it is possible to conceive of better assessment models that attempt to capture the quality of the process of artistic engagement, rather than relying on evaluating final products, I remain skeptical. I wonder, is it possible that we art educators may have to recognize that contradictions between cultivating creativity and overly structured approaches to teaching, making, and assessing cannot be meaningfully reconciled while retaining the centrality of enhancing students' creative capacities?

REFERENCES


ENDNOTES

1 I'm grateful to the teachers of the 1997 Spiral Workshop group—Kate Knudson, Arlette Wasik, and Mike Wierzbicki—for their early work in developing and modeling playful Surrealist-based creativity curriculum.
2 Immanuel Kant described art as having "purposiveness without purpose."
3 For more information on Spiral Workshop theme curriculum, check out the Spiral Workshop e-portfolio on the National Art Education Association website, http://naea.digication.com/Spiral/.
4 Dali termed this activity the Paranoiac-Critical Method. "The point is to persuade others of the authenticity of the transformations in such a way that the 'real' world from which they arise loses its validity" (Brotchie, 1995).
5 According to Surrealist legend the first sentence produced in the Surrealist game of a group of poets writing words in the pattern of adjective, noun, verb, adjective, noun without seeing each other's additions was "The exquisite corpse shall drink the new wine" (Bradley, 1997).
6 For an example of promoting peer interaction as a closure activity, see the post-project worksheet included with the plan for the Elementary "I" School project on the Spiral Art Education website, http://spiral.aa.uic.edu
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