Ways to Enhance Creativity: A Different Approach

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In 1990, when I began to write…*Understanding those who create* (1998), I began it with this vignette:

It was a convention for teachers of the talented. Katherine Miller had just been hired to teach in a pullout program for fourth, fifth, and sixth grade talented students. She was glad for the opportunity, for in her undergraduate years during her student teaching experiences, she had always seemed to gravitate toward the bright students. Her new superintendent had received an announcement for the state convention for teachers of the talented, and had told Katherine that he would pay her way to go so she could learn what she was supposed to teach….

Katherine had not been taught anything about talented children in her education courses, though she had a course in the education of other special children. Before her interview, she had gone to the state university library in a town nearby to do some reading. She had memorized the categories of the talented children that the state served. Among these were "creative" children. Katherine was not sure what creativity was, and was even less sure who "creative" children were. Were they the ones who colored outside the lines? Were they the ones who looked a little weird? She stepped into the large ballroom of the hotel where the convention was being held, took a cup of coffee, and sat down to hear the first keynote speaker.

The conference organizer introduced him as one of the experts on creativity. "Oh good," Katherine thought. As he began to speak, she settled in. He told a joke or two, and was a little mussed, his hair caught into a fashionable ponytail, his cowboy boots and jeans in contrast with his blazer and striped tie….

Overhead transparency after overhead transparency bloomed behind him on the giant screen. There were lots of diagrams and curves and arrows and dots and lists. He illustrated his points with cartoons cut out from "Peanuts." There was a list of tests also, but Katherine couldn't believe that you could give a test for creativity.

Well, he must know. She scanned the program as he spoke and underlined all the sessions that were on creativity. If he was a keynote speaker and the topic was creativity, obviously she was supposed to teach creativity. This would be her main emphasis at this convention. She collected the handouts of the dots and diagrams and psychological words, and she hurried down the hallway of the hotel convention wing to a small room.

There, with a pitcher of iced water and two glasses behind a table with a podium and a microphone and a smaller screen and another overhead projector, were two middle-aged women. They were local coordinators in a faraway corner of the state, and they were going to talk about how to enhance creativity in elementary school children. They also had many overheads blooming like flowers on the conference room wall, and they had the group play some simple games. It was fun, and everyone relaxed. But Katherine was getting anxious. The coordinators were very good speakers, and they were using words like 'fluency" and 'flexibility" and "elaboration" and they talked about creativity as if it were "problem-solving."

Well, they must know, Katharine thought, for they have been in this field a lot longer than I have. But in the back of her mind, she thought that creativity was a little bit more than fun and games and generating alternative solutions (Piirto, 1998).

When I wrote that, I had already been an educator of the gifted and talented for 13 years, had been a county coordinator in two states, a principal of New York City's oldest school for gifted children, and was now a college professor. But in my inner life, my real life, I was also an artist, a published novelist and a poet, and I saw the world through an artist's eyes….

But as I read and reflected, I found that most creative adults who had biographies written about them, who had written memoirs, who had been interviewed and researched, talked about their creative process in more organic terms…. Many of the creative and productive adults whose creativity I read about seemed to have creative processes that fell into thirteen categories.

- They seem to have rituals; for example, they like to walk.
- They crave silence.
- They go to retreats and colonies.
- They are inspired by travel.
- They use imagination.
- They trust their dreams.
- They seek solitude so they may go into a state of reverie (or flow).
- They fast.
- They meditate.
- They get inspiration from the muse.
- They are inspired by others' works of art, science, and music.
- They improvise.
- If they are blocked, they read or write self-help books.

I began to offer an undergraduate interdisciplinary studies course called "Creativity and the Creative Process," and I began to try out some ideas that tapped into this "oceanic consciousness," as Brewster Ghiselin called it (1952)….

The activities tap into the mysterious, nebulous, dreamy, solitary, quietness of the creative process as it has been written about and talked about by adult creators. A typical creativity course taught by me utilizes exercises in the core attitudes of risk-taking and naiveté. We do a lot of trust building by cheering each other's creative efforts. The students also try exercises in cultivating self-discipline by working daily in creativity thought logs. We work with the five I's:

- Imagery, including guided imagery and film script visualizing;
- Imagination, including storytelling;
- Intuition, including the intuition probe, psychic intuition, and dreams;
- Insight, including grasping the gestalt, going for the aha!, zen sketching;
- Inspiration, including the visitation of the muse, creativity rituals such as solitude, creating ideal conditions, and using background music.

….We try to find our domains of passion, that which we can't *not* do. We explore the joys of good conversation and start a monthly salon at my house. We visit a cemetery. We visit a beautiful and silent church with symbolic stained glass windows to meditate on God. We hike in nearby nature parks to meditate on nature. We go to an art museum to meditate on beauty. We visit a bookstore, a library; for the midterm the students must attend a live concert, a play, a poetry reading, or a lecture to honor the creativity of talented others.

The culmination of the course is an individual creativity project. The students may not use already existing kits or molds and must avoid the "season curriculum" of Christmas decorations, Halloween pumpkins, or St. Patrick's Day shamrocks. One student in Finland wrote a poem when we visited the art museum, and it became the lyrics for the first song she composed. Other individual creativity projects have included performance of an original radio play; a synchronized swimming routine; a grunge rock band audio tape; a reading of an original short story; an autobiographical multimedia presentation; a translation into English of Chinese, Greek, or Spanish literature; an original dance routine; a new recipe for scones; and designs for costumes for a play.

….Projects are evaluated with a holistic scoring system, and we are often so moved at the projects that we weep. At the end of the course, most agree that indeed, creativity can be enhanced through direct teaching.

My students who are becoming licensed to be teachers of the gifted and talented tell me that, yes, indeed, the K- 12 students that they work with can begin to see the creative process as something that is, at base, an emotional journey more than a cognitive one. Every week they try out the activities we have done in class, modifying them for their own use, for I am a firm believer that what

I teach is conceptual and not practical….The concept of “risk-taking” is what is important; the concept of “inspiration” is important to devise an activity at the application level that is suitable for the children one teaches. This is where the true creativity of the teacher comes in.

Teachers and parents can work in partnership to enhance creativity. First of all, creativity is affective—the necessary risk-taking and sense of openness to experience, or naiveté required demand a safe environment in which to explore. Both the home and the school should try to provide such. Trust is also important; that is, that someone who is trying out creatively should not be put down, and should be permitted to fail as well as to star. A person who tries out creativity should have a safe group (the class, the family) to be with….

My evolving process as a creative teacher is to try to capture some of what I have learned and to prepare activities or exercises that can make conscious what has, for many, been rather unconscious. Perhaps you will do the same.

How Parents and Teachers Can Enhance Creativity in Children

- Provide a private place for creative work to be done.
- Provide materials (e.g. musical instruments, sketch books).
- Encourage and display the child’s creative work and avoid overly evaluating it.
- Do your own creative work and let the child see you.
- Pay attention to what your family mythology is teaching.
- Value the creative work of others.
- Avoid emphasizing sex-role stereotypes.
- Provide private lessons and special classes.
- If hardship comes into your life, use the hardship positively, to encourage the child to express him/herself through metaphor.
- Emphasize that talent is only a small part of creative production and that discipline and practice are important.
- Allow the child to be “odd”; avoid emphasizing socialization at the expense of creative expression.
- Interact with the child with kind humor. Get creativity training.