

On Creativity

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We have written child-labor laws and we have outlawed, for the most part, physical torture, but we subject our children daily, with all good intentions, to soul torture. Young children, who should be imbibing the world through all their senses, are taught to read before their minds are fruitfully prepared for this (see Auer, p. 7). Older students are increasingly subject to standardized tests, indoctrinated in the blinkered thinking that these require. Recent studies and expert opinions add to the growing evidence, evidence we seem as a nation unable to assimilate in our classrooms, that creative experience is humanizing (see James, p. 17) and should be at the heart of any educational program. An opinion in *EdWeek* by Robert Sternberg¹ and a study from the UK by Sue Rogers² neatly bookend the problem for us.

Sternberg, having segued in his career from studying intelligence to studying creativity—not that there’s a bright line dividing these—sees creativity as a habit, a perspective that is shared in one way or another by others who study creativity, including especially Howard Gruber, for whom “a long and well-worked through apprenticeship is vital to the development of a creative life.”³

Yes, “eureka” or “aha” moments occur, but only after long periods of learning and application. They occur in a context of knowledge and work. As Sternberg says, “Knowledge is a necessary, but in no way sufficient, condition for creativity.” You and I may be bombarded every moment by a hail of mathematical insights direct from Plato’s intelligible realm. But unless we apply ourselves to learn sufficient math, we will remain forever ignorant of these. Archimedes leapt from his bath not because he was lucky but because he had devoted his life to studies that enabled an insight previously granted to no one else to light up in him.

Creativity involves discipline and hard work. For Sternberg, this work has the character of habit—the paradox, virtually an Aristotelian balance, of “routinely approach[ing] problems in novel ways.” Routine without novelty leads quick-

ly to death. Novelty without routine leads to diletantism and the illusion of creativity.

Habits can be encouraged or discouraged. And Sternberg sees the pressure toward standardized tests and machine grading of essays as—inadvertently—profoundly discouraging the habit of creativity, treating it as a bad habit rather than as a good one.

Further, encouraging creativity by making opportunities, encouraging students to be creative, and rewarding those who are creative does not necessarily mean the end of assessment or evaluation. Sternberg’s research, supported by others such as Teresa Amabile, demonstrates possibilities for assessing or evaluating creative work—originality, quality, and appropriateness are dimensions of a creative project that teachers can reliably assess.

Sternberg sees creativity as necessary for problem solving, but this raises an ethical question: Is the solution to the problem of flying an airplane into a building, for example, really creative? As we can form a concept of miseducation to describe, say, the influence of advertisements that “educate” us—transmitting knowledge and culture—can we form a concept of “mis-creativity” that acknowledges that the choice of problem to solve involves an ethical choice? Or do we need, as some researchers have done, to describe positive creativity with a medical qualifier like “moral”? Clearly, not every problem requires a creative solution. Not so clear, but open to question, does all creativity involve problem-solving?

Play is a key to the development of creativity in children. Sue Rogers at the University of Plymouth, UK, led research that shows that “[c]hildren are being denied the chance to develop at school through imaginative play because they spend so much time learning to read and write.” Ignoring the necessity for social, creative play leads to deficits in development of social skills and intellect.

Roger’s study confirms a sad fact about early childhood education in the UK—and we may believe the situation is similar in the US—but does

not delve into the reasons why imaginative, social play is healthful and even necessary. For research on this question, turn to Sara Smilansky,⁴ whose work in Israel has demonstrated powerfully the health-giving effects of what she calls “sociodramatic” play, play in which children pretend to be something that they are not—mother, pirate, or postal carrier, for example. Children allowed to play creatively gain in language acquisition and use, social skills, and mutual understanding. Learning these, we can see, guides children toward understanding and harmony; in the end, perhaps, alleviating suffering and even saving lives.

For Sternberg, creativity is important “because the world is changing at a far greater pace than it ever has before. . . . We need to think creatively to thrive, and, at times, even to survive.” For Rogers and Smilansky, children’s creative play opens the door to the development of skills that support thriving and surviving. From free play to development of the good habit and hard work of self-directed creativity, our children deserve better from us.

As Waldorf schools have demonstrated for decades, it is not necessary to compromise knowledge and achievement in order to sustain human development with creative learning. On the other hand, as Waldorf schools champion creative learning and creative experience, they, too, must beware the traps of routine and of dilettantism that lie on either side of the path they walk.

Endnotes

1. <http://www.edweek.org/tb/2006/02/21/426.html>
2. <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/PO/releases/2005/september/curriculum.aspx>
3. Gruber, Howard. “The Evolving Systems Approach to Creative Work.” In Wallace and Gruber, *Creative People at Work: Twelve Case Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.
4. Smilansky, Sara. “Sociodramatic Play.” In *Children’s Play and Learning*, Edgar Klugman and Sara Smilansky, eds., New York: Teachers College Press, 1990.

