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A Recipe for Artful Schooling

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By nourishing the latent artistry that exists in each student, teachers can spark creative engagement in any subject area.

It drives arts educators crazy. We have deep knowledge about creativity, but we're usually peripheral to the central education conversation about it in the United States, watching technology and engineering being taken more seriously. We notice that the arts are sometimes offered a seat at the table, but we feel viscerally how little of what we know is used to advance the creative learning agenda.

Several years ago, when I challenged the leaders of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills about the lack of input from the arts, I got an answer that said it all: We think the arts are valuable; they provide a "special sauce" for learning. Thirty thousand years of the arts' centrality to human learning reduced to a condiment.

Let's set aside this misperception. Here are three essential elements that belong dead center in any discussion of creativity in schooling—three healthy and delicious main courses from the arts that don't require additional blocks of arts instruction time and that can improve our anemic education diet.

Main Course 1: Intrinsic Motivation

Through extrinsic motivators, you can get people to do all kinds of things that pass for learning—regurgitating information on command, performing mental and physical tasks, making products that fit various assignments. But you can't compel someone to create, or make a new, personally relevant connection, or learn from experience—the fundamental acts of learning—through extrinsic motivators. Learning can be transformed into understanding only with *intrinsic* motivation. Learners must make an internal shift; they must choose to invest themselves to truly learn and understand. This need for creative engagement applies to all fields, including science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, as well as the arts.

But how much time and pedagogical energy do we dedicate to nurturing this sine qua non of creative engagement? Precious little, or none. Indeed, most of our schooling squelches learners' natural eruptions of intrinsic motivation and instead pushes them to learn whatever schools are required to teach. But in arts education (or, at least, in good arts education), we dedicate a lot of energy to nurturing intrinsic motivation.

Let's use an inclusive definition of art—to make stuff you care about—rather than the default definition of working in artistic media. In the arts, teachers specialize in creating environments that encourage learners to set aside the usual ground rules of schooling and invest themselves intrinsically. It requires an act of courage by students to bypass all the entrenched systems of reward and punishment to engage in activities that have no correct answers and that reveal something about who they are.

What good arts instruction has to offer creative education is effective ways to tap such motivation. For example, a self-portrait project for 9-year-olds could begin with this assignment: Draw three lines, each one of which captures something about how you feel today. With proper scaffolding, the student would go on to develop a complex image that represents that young person's sense of herself. Or a theater project—such as one conducted by the Epic Theatre Ensemble in New York City—might enable teenagers to express what they feel about authoritarian control as they update Sophocles's *Antigone*.

According to Richard Deasy and Lauren Stevenson (2005), in tough schools with good arts programs it's no surprise to find suspended students sneaking back into school for their arts activities, and it's no surprise to see schools that invest seriously in arts programming feel the benefits radiate into improved student motivation in *all* subjects.

Only a Side Dish

This switch from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation is why a good arts-integrated curriculum advances learning. It's important to note, however, that just bringing artistic media into a subject-area classroom doesn't automatically create arts integration.

Indeed, I once witnessed "the dance of the fractions," a culminating project in math in which kids performed a dance that embodied their study of fractions. They tested better on fractions as a result of this clever kinesthetic project, but it wasn't creative learning because the students' artist-selves were never activated. They presented and solved math problems in interesting ways, but they never made stuff they cared about, and they were no more invested in dance as a result.

However, when we get the arts-integrated curriculum right, we get positive learning results. Rather than using their bodies to represent algorithms having only one correct answer, students in good math-and-movement projects might explore patterns that relate to math and look at proportions in ways that matter to them, such as by using the golden mean as represented in the human body or expressing in dance the rhythmic relationships in a piece of music.

Main Course 2: The Essential Skills of Creativity

Our culture defines art by its nouns—things made in artistic media and the special, set-apart places where we go to encounter those high-quality nouns. However, the aliveness, the true power of art, lies in what people *do* to make those nouns and in what we do to make personally relevant connections to them.

For this reason, I've long argued that *art* is a verb. Any subject area becomes a medium for the work of art when we engage intrinsic motivation and the verbs of art kick in. That's why the terms "the medical arts," "the art of bricklaying," and "the art of motorcycle maintenance" used to be so common; there was an inherent understanding that every worthwhile endeavor raised to a high level of expression becomes a work of art.

If we do a good job of guiding students' potential for creativity, we can spark creative engagement in any subject area (see "Resources for Fostering Creativity"). Here are a few key skills.

Brainstorming

As Nobel Prize winner Linus Pauling once said, "If you want to get a great idea, first get a lot of ideas." Here's where brainstorming—that capacity to generate multiple solutions to a challenge or question—comes in. Good arts educators develop not only students' capacity for multiplicity, but also their pleasure in the process. As students learn to play with generating lots of possibilities, using this skill comes to feel good.

Teachers in all subject areas can develop the pleasure of brainstorming. For example, you might ask students to name five ways their morning would have been different had the South won the Civil War. Just to remind yourself what it feels like, try coming up with a quick list of 10 ways to use a brick in the kitchen.

Divergent Thinking

So what's one way of using that brick that no one else thought of? Divergent thinking is the capacity to come up with original, unexpected, or surprising ideas. It doesn't merely celebrate the originality aspect of creativity but rather highlights ideas that are unexpected *and* valuable. Although some people seem to have this skill more powerfully than others, all people have it to some degree—and we can develop it in our students by acknowledging and consistently celebrating its appearance.

You can cultivate divergent thinking by inviting students to imagine widely in all subjects. Offer this history challenge: What might have happened if Christopher Columbus's ship, the Santa Maria, had been blown further south to Panama? Or this engineering challenge: Suppose there's a fire in the school hallway; use objects in the classroom to create a good way to climb out the window and make your way safely down to the ground 20 feet below. Or this scientific thinking challenge: How could you use the scientific method to determine which of the following jokes is the funniest?

Metaphoric Thinking

Metaphoric thinking is a fundamental capacity connected to the arts but an increasingly underdeveloped one. We live in a belligerently literal culture; it's becoming harder for people to accept truths held in a metaphor that is not literally true.

Although we use metaphors all the time, we rarely unpack them for the truths they contain. When was the last time you explored the aspects of *fatherhood* that George Washington manifested in his leadership of the country?

Metaphoric thinking connects two usually disconnected categories of things in a way that provokes meaning. A good metaphor makes a ringing impression. When Carl Sandburg wrote, "The fog comes / on little cat feet," the connection of weather and feline created a statement so evocative and truthful that millions of people remember it.

I regularly invite students into analogical play by asking such questions as, If cumulus clouds were items of apparel, what might they be? If you had to make a speech to Congress about something in this room that expresses the biggest problem in the United States today, what might that thing be?

Teachers should engage students in a few minutes of metaphoric play every day, as a warm-up or a break between activities, to help students discover the pleasure of finding an apt metaphor that expresses something they know in an original way.

All strong communicators use metaphors effectively. Indeed, I defy you to find even a single article in the driest scientific journal that doesn't use a metaphor in a crucial way.

Flexible Thinking

Artists are flexible thinkers. They seamlessly go back and forth between considering parts and wholes. We want learners who can pour themselves into the full flow of optimal engagement. But creative accomplishment also requires the flexibility to use one's attention and intention in other ways: The successful young musician learns to hear his own performance, and the section's, and the whole orchestra's at the same time.

Artists are also masters at playing with multiple points of view. Teachers can take advantage of this strategy and invite students to imagine material they're studying from novel perspectives. For example, if each of the elements of the water cycle—precipitation, evaporation, and condensation—were a character, what insights might these characters express in a conversation about climate change? Teachers can pause for such playful experiments or invest more deeply in them as projects. The arts are exquisite gymnasiums for such cross-training workouts.

Multisensory Engagement

The arts remind us that the human body is more than a gizmo for transporting a head. Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences include kinesthetic, spatial, and musical smarts; many educators add emotional, practical, and intuitive acuity as important kinds of knowing that reach beyond thinking.

Good arts educators guide students to learn by doing something physically, "on your feet," or in the language of the art form. There's a long tradition of science class trips to the nature center and history class trips to the local historical society. Even without relocating, students can move, create sound and images, and use all their senses to explore concepts like the circulatory system, the astrophysics of dawn, or the motivations of J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield.

Empathy

In arts, education, and civic sectors, we're increasingly concerned about empathetic capacity in young people. I've heard the term *crisis of empathy* used in more than a few places in the last year.

Although the phrase often refers to instances of violence and bullying, it also applies to the problem of students' socializing less fluidly; stresses over diversity issues; the effect of pervasive electronic media use on youth; and the difficulty that students have making emotional connections to curricular material, especially older, less mediagenic material.

Arts education provides abundant solutions. Many reports cite the absence of bullying and violence, the positive social environment, and the successful group work that takes place in schools that invest in serious arts programs (Arts Education Partnership, 1999; Catterall, 2011, 2012; Deasy, 2002; Longley, 1999; Rupert, 2006). Too few schools, however, adopt what good arts educators do to create these results.

Arts educators can provide teachers with practical tools to address the empathy deficit. When students make things together in a well-prepared project, taking modest risks together, documenting the process, and switching roles along the way, they interact in new ways. I've frequently seen the class runt become the class star, with his peers looking at him anew. We know this to be true in our own lives. By working on a project together or walking in another's shoes, we revise our preconceptions and judgments of others.

Main Course 3: Inquiry-Based Learning

Students are going to spend their lives and their careers dealing with complex questions: How do you launch a new business before leaving your current job? How do you raise a child to be both ambitious and kind? But we do a poor job of preparing students to effectively and creatively manage these challenges. When given free range, arts education becomes exemplary inquiry-based learning.

The art-making cycle includes highly productive, creative, problem-solving processes. For example, how many businesses could announce a year in advance the exact minute their five highly complex new products will be launched, each of which must succeed or else the company may go bankrupt? Every regional theater and dance company in the United States routinely takes that challenge in stride.

Beyond that, the artistic process encompasses the following essential skills of learning:

- Asking great questions and identifying good problems.
- Experimenting, while carefully attending to results.
- Cultivating a productive relationship with failure.

- Anticipating challenges and generating imaginative solutions.
- Tolerating uncertainty (even taking pleasure in ambiguity).
- Engaging in appropriate risk taking.
- Being resilient.
- Focusing on quality and excellence.
- Eagerly and naturally self-assessing.
- Infusing ongoing reflection into the work at hand.
- Enjoying the process and getting personal satisfaction out of it.
- Connecting to others through an expression of who you really are.

Creating something out of yourself—and having the courage to offer it to others in the belief that it's valuable and will be received as such—is the essence of responsible citizenship. Indeed, abundant research shows that people who are actively involved in the arts (even just as attendees) participate in activities associated with good citizenship more than those who are not artistically involved (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007, 2009).

What We Can Do

Guided by its arts educators, every school can learn to design activities that foster the serious play of a creatively invested learner. Bring arts educators into your planning meetings; give them opportunities at faculty meetings to catalyze teachers' creative instincts.

This effort doesn't require a new program or new curriculum. Teachers already know how to teach more creatively. They just need a little permission and a little courage to do so—and arts educators can help them along the way.

In my work, I teach "the law of 80 percent"—that is, 80 percent of what you teach is who you are. So use what you already know and love to add creative practices to your teaching. Your increased creative investment will have a strong effect on student learning.

Wondering where to start? Ask better questions in every classroom and continually search for the juiciest challenges to give students. Encourage experimentation and celebration of unexpected results, including failures. Help students relax and enjoy the exploration in uncertainty rather than race for an answer as an escape from the less comfortable aspects of learning. Focus on appropriate risk taking in creative engagement, noting the high value of originality. Encourage students' motivation so they'll persist through difficulty. Have conversations about quality (not just accuracy) in every classroom every day.

Celebrate the satisfaction and fulfillment that arise naturally when students are guided through a creative art-making cycle. Foster a learning community that shares, dares, inquires, respects, and creates new worlds in small opportunities—and, I hope, in larger opportunities as these communities grow.

Create not only lifelong learners, but also lifelong *yearners* who can creatively transform almost any assignment, any job, any life circumstance into something of greater value.

Resources for Fostering Creativity

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