

# From Creative Self Expression to the Rise of the Creative Class: A Speculative Inquiry in the History of Art Education

From Creative Self  
Expression to the  
Rise of the  
Creative Class: A  
Speculative  
Inquiry in the  
History of Art  
Education

Arthur D. Efland  
Professor  
The Ohio State University  
E-mail: efland.1@osu.edu

## Abstract

Given the renewal of interest in creativity this paper looks at the history of two important historical antecedents in the history of art education. These are *creative self expression* and *creativity*. Though there are many definitions of creativity the paper places emphasis upon creativity identified as a social class in its own right. This view of creativity differs from past definitions where it tended to be defined as a psychological trait. In addition the paper ties self-expression and creativity to the rising and falling fortunes of the middle class. The examples are drawn from the history of art education in the United States from the 1920s to the present.

**Key Words :** Creative self expression, Creativity, Creative class

## Overview

In the last decade there has been a resurgence of interest in creativity and the role that education might play in its cultivation. Creativity is the process by which the mind generates new and original ideas and innovations. – ideas and things that have not existed before. In large part this new interest has been brought about by multiple problems and challenges facing civilization on a global scale -- problems such as environmental degradation, climate change, the globalization of the world's economies, and economic competition. This new interest in creativity is not only seen in the arts but is in fact evident in industrial societies everywhere.

A question which should concern art teachers is how or whether this new interest might influence the teaching of art as a subject where creativity and its cultivation were recognized as educational objectives for many years. Generally, we don't associate art education as a field having much to do with problems like those just mentioned. In fact, until recently the arts were not even considered cognitive endeavors. (Dorn, 1999; Efland, 2002; Eisner, 2002.)

The kind of creative thinking involved in solving societal and economic problems seems to be a far cry from the creativity that occurs within art practice. And yet art educators since Lowenfeld's time have been claiming that creativity in art and science though different in subject matter, involved similar thought processes. What is not clear is whether this belief was justified then and whether it is justified now?

I look into the history of this question by an exploration of the origin of the concept of *creative self-expression*. Creative self expression (CSE) as an educational philosophy and practice made its appearance in Europe and North America in the 1920s and in some ways was the precursor of creativity as it was understood during Lowenfeld's time, say the 1950s, but is it related to creativity as it is understood today?

The methodologies of CSE ruled out the imposition of adult influences and standards. Children were not expected to make art as adults made it, though as children grow older their art evolved through a series of stages which marked the attainment of greater levels of expressive competence.

The methods, media, subject matter and purposes were in theory ones that unfolded freely in each child. I say “*in theory*” since the art works created under the guidance of many early practitioners often had a kind of stylistic similarity that makes it possible to identify the teacher who had directed the art making activity! So a child working under the influence of a Marion Richardson in England would have produced work quite differently from the work of say Franz Cizek’s pupils in Vienna, Austria, or Florence Cane’s students at the Walden School in New York<sup>1</sup>. Each had somewhat different ideas of what child art should look like and had advanced slightly different pedagogies that help inspire children to make it, and yet, in spite of these differences, there were many points of similarity. These are now listed:

## Characteristics of Creative Self Expression

### The Idea of the Child as Artist

Embedded in (CSE) is a group of ideas, one being that the child is an artist, a creative individual with a unique potential for development. The child as artist was adapted from modernist conceptions of individual artistry as a practice unrestrained by the rules and conventions of European art academies of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Just as artists rebelled against the academic constraints placed upon their freedom in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, creative teachers began evolving new methods for teaching art early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, methods that would presumably allow the child’s ideas to unfold freely, unfettered by demands for social conformity. They believed each child was born with special potentialities and that traditional schooling slowly crushed and destroyed these by rote learning and mechanical methods of teaching. The teaching of art was portrayed as one place in the school environment where the child would have the freedom to develop his or her individual talents and capacities for personal expression.

<sup>1</sup> See my book *A History of Art Education* for discussions of the work of these art educators.

## **The Idea of a Developmental Process**

A second characteristic of (CSE) is the idea that each child's development is a unique unfolding of innate tendencies. No two individuals are alike though they may share common attributes. Since no two individuals are alike the notion of an educational standard is a mathematical abstraction derived by a reductive process where the unique or idiosyncratic traits of individuals are systematically discounted in favor of standard traits. CSE began to appear in American schools during the 1920s when so called "scientific" techniques such as intelligence testing and cost-benefit management first made their appearance. Then, many progressive educators reacted negatively to the use of such mechanistic procedures in schooling and chose instead to emphasize the emotional, artistic, and creative aspects of human development -- what Margaret Naumberg in her book *The Child and the World* called "the most living and essential part of their natures".

## **The Idea of Expression**

A third idea is that each individual's purpose is to express himself or herself, to realize his or her full individuality through creative work. "Every law, convention or rule of art that prevents self expression should be abolished." (Cowley, 1935, pp. 69-70). When self expression is thwarted either by a loss of confidence or by the imposition of adult ideas, emotional or mental disturbance is likely to be the result. (Efland, 1990, p 235)

## **Characteristics of The Creative Class**

Current discussions of creativity differ markedly from the CSE just described. These include the rise of what Richard Florida calls the creative class. He describes factors that identify the attributes of creativity, and finally discusses their importance in education as societies prepare younger generations of youth for creative economic productivity.

## Rise of the Creative Class

The social creativity that addresses the kind of problem solving referred to in my opening paragraph refers to the development of new technologies and products with an emphasis upon economic growth. Florida's book *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2003) posited the notion that certain social environments have high concentrations of creative professionals that collectively operate as a social class in their own right. In his view the creative class functions in a particular type of social environment that is responsible for bringing about innovation in technology, the sciences and the arts. He claims that in the United States "nearly 40 million workers – some 30% of the workforce are part of the creative class, engaged in science and engineering, research and development, including the technology based industries, the arts, music, film-making, aesthetics and design. When creativity is discussed in terms of class membership it is less likely to be regarded as the result of a dimension of personality and is more likely to be regarded as a quality of particular social environments where creative activities are cultivated. As Florida discusses creativity it includes but is not limited to the arts.

From Creative Self  
Expression to the  
Rise of the  
Creative Class: A  
Speculative  
Inquiry in the  
History of Art  
Education

## Factors Comprising the Creative Class

The first characteristic Florida mentions is the presence of *new technological innovations*. The computer and wireless telephone would be obvious examples. The second are the *talents and abilities of individuals*. Having a person like a Steve Jobs of the Apple Computer Company would be an example. He did not invent the computer but had the idea that the computer could be a relatively small machine that could fit on a desk-top and that enabled many people to have access to the technology of computation by digital means. Still a third is the social factor he calls *tolerance* which in some ways is the most important factor and which consequently will merit further discussion.

The emphasis in much of Florida's writing is on the social formation of urban environments that enable certain places to become hospitable for technological innovation. Whereas older economies relied upon their

proximity to natural resources, new centers of economic activity are likely be places where cultural assets abound that give life interest and variety. Of particular interest Florida has found that what makes certain environments attractive is an openness to differences. He writes:

The creative class people I study use the word “diversity” a lot . This is spoken of so often, and so matter-of-factly, that I take it to be a fundamental marker of creative class values. Creative-minded people enjoy a mix of influences. They want to hear different kinds of music and try different kinds of food. They want to socialize with people unlike themselves, trade views and spar over issues. . . . [V]isible diversity serves as a signal that a community embraces the open meritocratic values of the creative age. The people I talked to also desired nightlife with a wide mix of options. The most highly valued options were experiential ones --- interesting music venues, neighborhood art galleries, performance spaces and theatres. (Florida 2003, p.8)

## The Differentiation of Social Classes in America

In what follows I will turn toward the evolution of social classes in American life. I do this for two reasons . The first is to show that creativity does not occur in a vacuum. It is grounded in the needs and aspirations of particular groups of people. The second is to speculate on the educational needs of the future. I use my country’s educational practices and experiences as an example both of what has been effective in the past but also to illustrate what remains problematic in the future.

When and where did creative self-expression first begin to appear? To understand its rise as a working concept in the history of education it will be helpful to review the differentiation of social classes in American life. The point and purpose of this is to show that (CSE) arose as a reflection of the aspirations of a rising middle class. I start with a description of the American upper class that came about during an era of rapid economic growth in the decades following the Civil War. This was an era when great fortunes were made by such individuals as Cornelius Vanderbilt, John D.

Rockefeller, Andrew Mellon, Andrew Carnegie and others. The wealth of the period was marked by ostentatious architectural display and for this reason was coined the “Gilded Age” by writers such as Mark Twain. This upper class opulence was also marked by the rise of philanthropy that endowed colleges, hospitals, museums, academies, schools, opera houses, public libraries, symphony orchestras and the like.

Upper class culture was a social formation that took place in the latter decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the economic largesse of numerous business men began to consolidate their social standing in American life by founding museums, libraries and to purchase large collections of art mostly from European sources. America was portrayed as being more than an industrial society. High culture was a commodity largely imported from Europe by such art dealers as Joseph Duveen. (Hughes, 1997, p. 230)

Within the 1890s new practices arose in art education promoting schoolroom decoration and picture study so that American children could become civilized through exposure to the reproduced images of high culture bought and paid for by their social “betters”. (Efland, 1990 pp. 145-146) Upper class culture was a culture largely imported from the aristocracy of Europe.

### **The Progressive Era**

The Gilded Age was also a time marked by political corruption and scandal. By contrast, the “Progressive Era” that followed in the years between the 1890s and the 1920s, was one committed to political reform. During this time a middle class had begun to develop in American life that was leery both of the business elite, sometimes called the “robber barons”, at one extreme and the populist political movements of farmers and blue collar laborers at the other. The progressives were avid modernizers. They believed in science, technology and especially education – as the solution to society’s difficulties.

The Progressive Education Movement arose in reaction to the prevalence of an educational formalism that had evolved in American schooling by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The dictionary definition of formalism is a “strict or excessive attention to or insistence on outward forms

and customs as in art or religion.” (Websters New World Dictionary 1964, pp. 569). Though the movement had its antecedents in the educational activities of Francis W. Parker and John Dewey, it took root in the years following the First World War (1918 –1930).

Middle class culture. By the 1920's a new kind of culture arose, a largely urban culture of the middle class. It was a blend of such influences associated with modernism including Freudian ideas on the nature of repression as a factor in mental illness. A second was the appearance of expressionism as the dominant aesthetic in modern art. Expressionism appeared in the dance of Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham, in the paintings of John Marin, and Georgia Okeefe. It also involved the rise of new forms of popular culture such as the cinema and jazz . A fourth was the rise of the artist as a cultural hero as opposed to the businessman. One sees reflections of this belief in Rugg & Shumaker's book *The Child-Centered School*:

To comprehend the significance of the child-centered schools, one would need indeed, to understand the attempts of the creative artist to break through the thick crust of imitation, superficiality and commercialism which bound the arts almost throughout the first three centuries of industrialism (Rugg & Shumaker, 1928, p.v.)

A fifth was the idea of the “child as artist.” This latter idea was seen in the teaching of such individuals as Franz Cizek in his juvenile classes in Vienna. Reproductions of his children's art works were widely distributed by the International Red Cross throughout Europe and North America, spreading the idea that children will produce great art when left to their own devices.<sup>2</sup>

Cycles of Expansion in Middle Class Culture. The middle class underwent expansion in American life in the years following World War I and again in the years following World War II. These periods of expansion were

---

<sup>2</sup> As modernism took hold artists like Picasso often likened themselves to the child. Picasso once said that when he was a child he could draw like Raphael and that as a result he spent most of his life trying to draw like a child



ones accompanied by rapid economic growth. In both periods CSE became a prominent doctrine in schools catering to the needs of this class. After World War I this occurred mainly in private schools that served the children of a well-educated middle class population, especially in the cities along the eastern seaboard. Late in his career Harold Rugg noted "that progressive schools were with some notable exceptions mostly private schools. (Rugg cited in Cremin, 1964, p. 276)

In the era following World War II there was a second resurgence of interest in creative expression. This time it occurred mainly in the affluent suburbs surrounding the major cities rather than the cities themselves.<sup>3</sup> It appeared in communities like Westport and New Canaan, Connecticut, in Evanston, Illinois, Shaker Heights, Ohio, and Pasadena, California. This time the prevailing influence on the practices of art education came from Lowenfeld and D'Amico. Lowenfeld's *Creative and Mental Growth* (1947) provided a psychology for the theory of creative expression while D'Amico's *Creative Teaching of Art* (1942) modeled indications for practice.

The doctrines just mentioned that constituted CSE, came into being when there was a major expansion in the size, educational level and influence of the middle class. A new consciousness began to develop that over time enabled large numbers of people to socially differentiate themselves from both genteel upper class culture, the culture of the Gilded Age, while also maintaining its separation from the working class. Schooling for the working class stressed obedience to vested authority, punctuality, and cultural uniformity. The acquisition of subject matter competence was determined by standardized testing. By contrast schools for middle class children stressed the development of individuality where each child was recognized for his or her unique abilities, interests and accomplishments. When these values prevailed the less formal procedures of creative self-expression began to meet with public acceptance as practices in schooling.

Cycles of Contraction and Middle Class Decline. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were also periods when the middle class stagnated or declined. So also did the popularity of CSE decline as a concept in the philosophy and

<sup>3</sup> See my discussion of the suburbanization of art education in Efland, 1990 pp229-230.

practice of education. This happened in the years of the Great Depression (1929-1940) when interest turned away from purposes like self-expression. George Counts a professor of education at Teachers College Columbia was critical of the concept of child-centered schooling as lacking social consciousness. Others like Melvin Haggerty, who was dean of the College of Education at Minnesota University, felt that the teaching of art should focus on providing individuals with practical knowledge to improve the home, and the daily life of the community rather than focus upon the study of remote masterpieces located in far away countries. Counts and Haggerty turned away from creative self-expression as an elitist cult toward the use of art as a way to solve problems of daily living.

Haggerty wrote:

Art as a cult may be a hindrance rather than an aid to art as a way of life. . . .The teacher's art must be that of the broad and crowded avenues of life, the home, the factory and the market place. It is this conception that must be clarified and dramatized in concrete ways if art is to take its place in the schools as a major and vital instrument of cultural education (Haggerty, 1935, p.43 cited in Efland 1990, p. 206)

The Cold War Era . The affluence that followed in the wake of World War II came to an end as the Cold War intensified. I refer to the years between 1958 and 1965. Then the United States felt threatened by Russian space achievements, (Efland 1990 p. 237). It was not unusual to see many school districts cut their art and music programs and apply their resources instead to improve the teaching of science and math. The arts had to be defended if these fields were to continue to remain in the school. Two lines of argument made their appearance within art education.

The first was the *art for creativity* argument, the idea that art is important in the curriculum because it enables creative problem-solving skills to develop sooner than they might otherwise arise in subject fields where a considerable body of knowledge must first be present in one's thought before acts of creative activity might become evident. In the arts, so the argument went, creative activity could make its appearance at an early age

since the mind can work directly with visual or auditory images without having to wait for the mastery of symbol systems. Once habits and dispositions of creative behavior have been acquired, these lessons might then transfer to other fields like the sciences. This was the argument advanced by Viktor Lowenfeld who felt that the educational purpose for teaching art was to foster the development of creative abilities. He cited J. P. Guilford and others who, using psychometric measurements, noticed that the same creative traits seem to appear in all areas. (Lowenfeld, 1958).

The Cold War also precipitated a second reaction within art education. I will call this the *discipline oriented* argument that took the form of participation in a curriculum reform movement based on the structure of the disciplines. In his book *The Process of Education* (1960) Jerome Bruner contended that the heart of curriculum reform lies with the disciplines and that these can be represented in some intellectually honest form to students at all levels of instruction. Two years later Bruner's idea of the disciplines began having an impact on art education. Manuel Barkan began applying Bruner's idea of the disciplines to art. In his view "the key educational task is to give students an understanding of the fundamental structure of any subject we see fit to teach . . . [and that] when applied to the teaching of art this would mean that *there is a subject matter of the field of art, and it is important to teach it.* (1962 p. 13)

With these two arguments offered to defend the arts, a question that arises is why had the field of art education chosen the path of the disciplines rather than the path of creativity? Why were Lowenfeld's ideas about creativity and self expression not pursued more vigorously? Despite the fact that much of the doctoral research done under his guidance had focused on creativity, the topic was virtually a dead issue by 1965.<sup>4</sup> One answer might have been Lowenfeld's untimely death in the spring of 1960 but a second and more likely reason might have been the collapse of the Progressive Education Movement in the late 1950s, a movement that not only favored *creative self-expression* (CSE) but was actually responsible for

<sup>4</sup> I cite the year 1965 because that was the year that the Penn State Seminar was held, and though the conference was held on the Penn State Campus and focused on research in curriculum development in art, it was dominated by individuals like Elliot Eisner and Manual Barkan who saw the reform of the field as lying in its disciplined character..

coining the expression. Indeed CSE was one of the shibboleths by which adherents of this movement were identified<sup>5</sup>. This leads to still a further question namely, why had progressive education as a movement fallen on hard times?<sup>6</sup> One reason was that its vision of education was perceived to lack the substantive rigor needed for a time of critical competition with the Soviet Union as dramatized by the dramatic success of their space achievements. Still another is that by 1958 the era of post World War II prosperity had come to an end and the nation once again fell into recession.

### An Historical Conjecture

It is my conjecture that in periods of economic decline educational practice tends to move in the direction of formal structure and away from the more fluid structures of a creative self expression curriculum. This can be seen if one were to compare the idea of discipline centeredness as it appeared in the early 1960s with its later incarnations known as *discipline-based art education* (DBAE) which appeared in 1987 and whose proponents were generally hostile to the idea that art education should emphasize self expression. This can be seen in the following passage:

As a contemporary configuration of ideas, the DBAE orientation also differs significantly from the creative self-expression approach to art education that has dominated the field for 40 years. Within the creative self expression rationale, art is seen as an instrument for developing what is assumed to be each child's inherent creativity and expressive abilities. . . . The creative self-expression approach places great emphasis on art activities; DBAE, in contrast, requires a balanced art curriculum that emphasizes content from the four art disciplines. (Clark, Day & Greer 1987, p. 133)

---

<sup>5</sup> I regard creative self expression as one of the curriculum antecedents of what later came to be called creativity.

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence Cremin's *Transformation of the School* (1964) provides a succinct account of the history and influence of the progressive education movement and the conflicts within the movement that led to its eventual demise.

In effect, DBAE took a step backward, toward formalized instruction that worked to impose structure and standardization upon instructional content, or in other words, it adopted educational practices that had begun to move toward the formalized practices of the 1890s, practices that had antedated progressive education.

If my conjecture is correct I think we have something like a hypothesis about when self-expression and creativity are likely to meet with public acceptance and when not. It is the belief that in periods of economic expansion there is a tendency to emphasize the importance of creative activities in the curriculum whereas in periods of economic decline there is a tendency to reduce an emphasis upon creative activities in favor of more formalized study with emphasis placed upon textbooks and formal courses of instruction in the history and criticism of art. Though DBAE widened the array of instructional content by the inclusion of art history, art criticism and aesthetics, it also took a step toward greater standardization of instructional content. It took a step away from creative expression as a valid purpose for art education.

In the years between the Cold war Era and the present there were additional periods of economic recession. One occurred during the early 1980s when the nation's economy entered a period of recession. The second is the current economic recession that began in September 2008 and continues to this day. However, there is another factor that began to be felt within the American middle class, namely that from the time of the Reagan era (1980-1988) to the present there was no real expansion in its size and influence. There were periods when the economy actually grew yet there was an actual decline in middle class incomes. In the following passage David K. Johnston describes the situation that had prevailed in the United States during last thirty or so years:

The benefits of this bonanza flowed overwhelmingly to those at the apex of the economic pyramid. The base of that pyramid has weakened as average incomes have shrunk and more risks were forced upon them by government policies that favor those at the top . . . For the bottom 90 percent of Americans, a group we will refer to as the vast majority, annual income has

been on a long mostly downhill slide for more than three decades .  
(Johnston, 2007, p.10)

### **No Child Left Behind**

The thirty year period described by Johnston also saw the rise of an educational reform covered by a law known as *No Child Left Behind*. The so called reforms that have taken place under the NCLB law have transformed mass public education into a cultural practice based upon standardized testing where educational merit is defined narrowly in terms of standardized answers. In a word educational practice witnessed a return to the educational formalism of the 1890s and early 1900s. One might ask, “what is wrong with educational practice based on testing that is evaluated by responses to questions?” The problem is that not all questions can be answered with a single right answer. Another is that since no two individuals are alike, the notion of an educational standard is itself suspect. As noted earlier it is a mathematical abstraction derived from a reductive process where the unique traits of individuals are systematically discounted in favor of traits that numerous individuals share in common. If we want to reform the schools in a way that fosters creative ability in students the practices that emerged in *No Child Left Behind* would be exactly the wrong approach.

### **Conclusion: From the Middle Class to the Creative Class**

I spent quite a lot of time describing the rising and falling fortunes of the middle class in American life to advance the conjecture that creative self expression was an educational practice that served an emergent middle class at times when its economic affluence was expanding. I also raised the question of whether there is some connection between creative self-expression as it emerged in the 1920s and 1940s and the concept of the creative class as it is currently emerging in the opening years of this century? Given the economic recession that exists in Europe and America at present, it is likely that Florida's idea of a creative class has little or nothing to do

with those earlier forms of creative self-expression that flourished during periods of affluence in the Progressive Era. By contrast, the creative class is a thesis advanced to explain connections between creativity and economic development and the role the arts might play in the development of cities and nations in the future. Certainly the schools might play a role in advancing the fortunes of the creative class but what form this might take is a subject for another paper. At very least the preparation of the creative class will rely on the ability to transcend conventional ideas in favor of receptivity to the new, the original and the different. I believe that this is not so much a matter of change in subject matter as it is a change in the atmospherics of schooling, making of it a place filled with curiosity and wonder.

From Creative Self  
Expression to the  
Rise of the  
Creative Class: A  
Speculative  
Inquiry in the  
History of Art  
Education



## References

- Barkan, M. (1962). Transition in art education: Changing conceptions of curriculum and theory. *Art Education*. 15(7), 12-18.
- Barkan, M. (1966). Curriculum problems in art education. In E. Mattil (Ed.), *A seminar in art education for research and curriculum development* (pp. 240-255). U.S. Office of Education Cooperative Research Project No. V-002.
- Bruner, J. (1960). *The process of education*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Clark, G., Day, M., & Greer, W. D. (1987). Discipline-based art education: Becoming students of art. *Journal of aesthetic education* 21(2), 129-196.
- Cowley, M. (1951). *Exiles return*. New York: Viking Press (original work published 1934) (pp. 69-70).
- Cremin, L. (1964). *Transformation of the school*. New York: Vintage Books.
- D'Amico V. (1942). *Creative teaching of art*. Scranton PA: International Textbook Co.
- Dorn, C. M. (1999). *Mind in art: Cognitive foundations in art education*. N.J.: Mahwah L. Erlbaum Associates.
- Efland, A. (2002). *Art and cognition-Integrating the visual arts in the curriculum*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Eisner, E. (2002). *The arts and the creation of mind*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Florida, R. (2003). *Rise of the creative class and how its transforming work, leisure, and community*. New York: Basic Books.
- Haggerty, M. (1935). *Art a way of life*. Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hughes, R. (1997). *American visions: The epic history of art in America*. New York: Knopf.
- Johnston, D. K. (2007). *Free lunch: How the wealthiest Americans enrich themselves at government expense*. New York: Penguin Group.
- Lowenfeld, V. (1947). *Creative and mental growth*. New York: Macmillan.



- Lowenfeld, V. (1958). Current research on creativity. *NEA journal*. 47, 538-540.
- Rugg, H. & Shumaker, A. (1928). *The child-centered school*. New York: World Book Co.

From Creative Self  
Expression to the  
Rise of the  
Creative Class: A  
Speculative  
Inquiry in the  
History of Art  
Education

