

Boxes and corrals: Creativity and art education revisited

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Abstract

Current interest in creativity is motivated by our awareness of the many problems that we need collectively to address. The kind of creativity called for differs from the kind promoted earlier in the twentieth century by art educators such as Viktor Lowenfeld and Herbert Read. Whereas the early version was conceived as an individual ability oriented to individual self-fulfillment and structured as a rejection of conventional rules, the current one is more a product of group interactions oriented to solving common problems and as an active selecting and using of a set of rules. This is illustrated by reference to some contemporary artists. It is argued that the required attitudes toward rules are more easily fostered in art than in other school subjects.

Key Words: creativity, self-expression, problem-solving

Education for creativity is currently a topic of popular discussion around the world, largely because of the widespread perception that fostering creativity is the key to economic health and to a response to the emergence of new problems, many of which are urgent and global in scale. In the USA, it is a major response to the widespread anxiety about these problems, especially those related to the economy and the public schools (the other response is its opposite - increased standardized testing in schools).

A quick list of examples of our new problems might include: producing a better way to store energy, renovating an inner city district, recycling consumer wastes, controlling the spread of diseases, promoting healthier life styles, producing a non-gasoline-burning automobile, designing a web-based software program, improving agricultural production, and creating a community-based artwork. A common characteristic of these problems is that they require the use of several disciplines and they are too complex for only one person to manage.

Most people today, including myself, believe that one can be creative in any discipline or school subject matter; and I have no doubt that we need to foster creative thinking in all school subjects and with respect to many kinds of problems. It should be an educational goal for all teachers. But I believe that the visual arts, as distinct from, say, math or science, can have a special role to play in fostering creativity in young people.

So here I am going to update the argument that Professor Efland, in his article also appearing in this issue, attributed to Viktor Lowenfeld: that it is easier to teach art in a way that fosters creative thinking than other subjects. And to do that I am going to compare, in a slightly different way, the same two conceptions of creativity that Professor Efland discusses: the creative Self Expression and a contemporary one that is more relevant today. We agree on the major outlines of this comparison and I refer in general to his account of it. My account differs mostly in that it refers to the work of adult artists rather than to children.

These two general accounts of creativity are chosen because they are the two primary versions affecting the history of art education, at least in the USA. The first comes to us from the 40s and 50s and the second from today. The intervening period, dominated first by a disciplinary emphasis (DBAE)

and then by a social one (social justice, visual culture) paid little attention to creativity. So we appear, in a way, to be returning to the concerns of the earlier period, with, of course, significant differences. This paper is about the differences; there is no space here to discuss the many similarities.

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Thinking outside the box

There is a common metaphor in English for creativity –to “think outside the box.” Though it is still a very popular metaphor, I think it embodies the older way of understanding creativity, the way of Creative Self Expression or of Modernism. The metaphor suggests that the box is a set of restrictive walls that prevent our thoughts from moving freely, limiting them to well-known patterns that are already determined by the shape of the box. So it contrasts thinking “inside the box,” which is predictable and non-creative, with thinking “outside of the box,” which is unconstrained and can be creative.

What is this “box”?

It is a very general sense of the rules that govern our conduct, anything that carries a sense of the authority of society’s expectations over individual actions. These expectations are embodied in our language and social conduct and also in our intellectual disciplines and school subjects. They include laws, moral expectations, spelling, dress codes, cooking recipes; and also the concepts and procedures of academic disciplines, the normal ways of proceeding in math, science, literature, history and art. I am going to call them simply “*the box*” or more often “*the rules*.”

We experience these rules as both helpful guides to behavior, what we should do in certain circumstances, and as restrictions, telling us what we should not do. Usually we learn to respect and accept them. But the metaphor of the box suggests that to think creatively requires us to reject them and to think without them. It is, then, a dichotomous metaphor: either we are contained within the box or we escape from it, rejecting all of the rules it represents. This is the view of creativity that Professor Efland calls Creative Self Expression, which we both find misleading.

Creative Self Expression descends from the European romantic movement of the late 18th and 19th centuries and was embodied in the idea of the lonely genius. The genius was usually an artist who was driven to express his emotional life in highly expressive and creative ways. Creativity was associated with inspiration, sometimes from God or the gods, sometimes from the unconscious mind; it was not a product of the rational mind, which proceeds by calculating according to known rules and hence thinks “inside the box.” The idea was also associated with Modernism in art, with psychoanalysis in theory, and with unconventional behavior in society.

A figure emblematic of this idea might be Van Gogh. His creativity was manifested especially in the new and unconventional style of painting he developed – he painted outdoors, rapidly and without correction, used color more for emotional effect than for realism, and laid his paint on thickly. This style was held to express his turbulent inner states of mind in a powerful and creative way.

Jackson Pollock, who also created a new and unconventional style of painting, is a good twentieth century example of the stereotype. Pollock famously used the brush in an unconventional manner, throwing the paint at the canvas instead of contacting the canvas with it. Another rule that Pollock rejected was the idea that a painting should be interpreted vertically – that it should have a top and a bottom that help define it. Pollock laid his canvas on the floor and walked around it, working on it from each side, as young children sometimes do. This meant that he did not need to decide which way was to be up and which was to be down until he was finished. Nor did he have to decide beforehand where the edges of the painting were to be; only later would he cut the canvas where he thought best.

I mention these aspects of Van Gogh’s and Pollock’s treatment of their medium because they are where their creativity is thought to lie - in their rejection of the conventional rules regarding their medium. We could say that every artistic medium comes in a box – that is, carries a set of rules about how it should be handled. Some of these are natural rules, part of the physical properties of the medium – one can’t do the same things with watercolor as with oil paint. Others are conventions that have been built up over time, such as expectations of realism or of the vertical orientation of a

painting. Van Gogh and Pollock were thought to have rejected these conventional rules, worked without them - outside of the box that they constituted.

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Of course this understanding of creativity affected more than art. It was a part of the progressive movement and of child-centered education in general, and it influenced scholars and teachers of all disciplines. Nevertheless it had a special association with the visual arts and the teaching of art was much more affected by it than was the teaching of other school subjects. The basic reason for this was an ideological heritage of Romanticism, which distinguished categorically between the insights of imagination and the calculations of reason. This distinction was also dichotomous: the conclusions of reason were held to be “cognitive” in character while the insights of imagination were inspired but “non-cognitive.” While reason – calculation using carefully described rules - was the principal value of most school subjects, the imagination was what animated the arts. These views disappeared, of course, by the 1960s in the “cognitive revolution,” although one still sees echoes of them, as in the popular (and false) view that art and creativity use only the right side of the brain and reasoning uses the left.

A contemporary view of creativity

I now briefly discuss a more contemporary view of creativity, one that contrasts with Creative Self Expression in many ways. A major difference is what we find valuable about creativity. The Creative Self Expression view held that creativity was valuable for the expression or development of the self that lay within the individual. Its value was not primarily social but individual. Today, as I already mentioned, we think its value is primarily social because it can address the kinds of problems I mentioned earlier.

These problems are primarily social problems, not individual ones, and they are complex, requiring a combination of ideas from different disciplines for their solution. Creativity today, therefore, lies in the conceptual interaction of ideas from different disciplines, in overlaying one conceptual scheme on another, in developing new procedures or applying old ones to new areas. It also lies in the social interactions of a group of people who together

represent the relevant different disciplinary backgrounds. In short, creativity is a social product rather than an individual one. It lies in the interaction of both ideas and of people and is a product of the exchange of knowledge, ideas and points of view within a group as much as of the abilities of one person.

It follows that members of a creative group must each have both a flexible knowledge of some discipline and some group social skills. For the first, they need an understanding of the traditional ideas and procedures of a discipline and also a mind open to the possibilities of other disciplines. For the second, they must also be able to present their own ideas clearly and to listen to others, to be sometimes persistent in their convictions and sometimes open to changing their mind. They must enjoy intellectual speculation in general, and, as Richard Florida has argued, find interest in diversity of all kinds.

This version of creativity involves a different attitude to the rules, both disciplinary and social ones. The rules are not now understood dichotomously as commandments that must be either followed or rejected, as a box that contains you or that you must escape from. They are rather a flexible set of useful concepts and procedures that can be followed when relevant but shuffled, redesigned, or ignored when it seems useful to do so. Creativity consists in large part in deciding just which rules might fruitfully be followed and which changed or ignored in particular situations, when to be persistent and when change one's approach. It requires a decision to reconstruct some rules and not others and then the persistence to find out where the reconstructions lead. This means that the rules are not experienced primarily as a box that restricts, a set of requirements imposed from outside, but rather as guides that suggest ways of solving a problem or of identifying further problems and as items of choice.

This attitude shows up clearly, I think, in contemporary art. John Baldessari said this in a recent interview with ART21¹ about his own way of working:

¹ John Baldessari, ART21, fifth season; a television series by ART21, broadcast by PBS, October, 2009. Series available from ART21.com.

What's my system? I think my idea is this: not so much structure that it's inhibiting or that there's no wiggle room, but not so loose that it could be anything. I guess it's like a corral around your idea, a corral that you can move around in—but not too much. And it's that limited movement that promotes creativity.

A corral, of course, was structure of variable shape made of fences and used by cowboys to contain their cattle or horses. It prevented the animals from wandering away out of control but allowed them enough room to move around to be healthy. It could also be changed to serve various specific purposes, such as herding them in certain directions, loading them on trucks, moving to fresh pasture. In this metaphor, the movable fences are the rules and the animals are the creative thoughts.

I will briefly mention a couple of contemporary artists as examples. They are both photographers. One is Cindy Sherman, in her series 100 Hollywood Stills.

For this series, Sherman adopted some unusual rules for photographers. She repeatedly photographed herself but the photos were not self-portraits. She was not personally identifiable in the photographs; she dressed and posed to suggest a type of woman (but not an individual) recognizable in old Hollywood movies; she chose a background situation that suggests a typical Hollywood situation – a kitchen, a beach, a street in New York; and she had no one else in the photo, though there is usually a strong narrative suggestiveness to it. The result is a critical comment, sometimes strong, sometimes subtle, about the way Hollywood has typically portrayed women.

My second example is the series titled Hiding in the City, by Liu Bolin, a photographer from Beijing.

Bolin adopted a different set of unusual rules for these photographs, which can be described like this: he chose a significant background, wearing simple clothes of a neutral color; he stood very still; he and his clothing were painted by assistants so as to make him almost disappear against the background; the result was photographed. The results are highly expressive, though because of cultural differences I may not understand the qualities

well (*Suojia Village* seems to me to express a sense of the loss of individuality in a big city).

One can see that these self-chosen rules for photography help Sherman and Bolin to create further works. They can maneuver within and use these rules, as in a corral. Sherman's rules suggest that she should choose a different female stereotype and situation for another photograph; and Bolin's suggest that he choose a different background to stand against, a different camera angle to shoot from – all to see what further meanings will arise.

While this analysis applies rather obviously to contemporary artists, it can be extended to traditional artists. I have already discussed the rules that Van Gogh and Jackson Pollock chose, which had to do mostly with the way the medium of painting was handled. A slightly different example might be Monet, whose creativity in the famous water lily series sprang, as Stokes has argued, from his decision to limit his vision strictly to the surface of the pool: no horizon, no banks, no solid objects, no perspectival rendering – only the surface of the water².

I have no doubt that one could find the same attitudes toward rules in the work of adult inventors and innovators in many fields and that it can be nurtured in all school subjects. But I believe, as do many others, that art can be particularly good at nurturing them in beginners.

My first reason for thinking this lies in the way that the rules initially appear to the beginner. In most school subjects, the conceptual structures and standard procedures when first met are already abstracted from the concrete world and are delivered in symbolic form. Therefore the beginner needs to learn the relevant symbolic system to access them. This means that attention must first be given to learning the rules, which then appear to arrive from outside, to be externally imposed. They are not experienced as being chosen or created, nor as inviting choice or exploration. They appear to beginners to be more like a box that constrains than a corral to play with. Furthermore, the rules of the symbolic systems (especially language and math) take considerable time to master and easily drown out attention to experimentation with changing them.

² Stokes, P.D. (2001): *Variability, constraints, and creativity: Shedding light on Claude Monet*. *American Psychologist*, 56 (4), 355-359.

In contrast, most of the rules of art are presented directly by the medium and are not symbolically mediated. Every medium imposes restrictions on what can be done and they can be discovered through direct experience. Their learning is experienced as exploration because the medium invites experiment and gives direct feedback. This allows, even encourages, experimentation with different approaches.

There is a second and more abstract reason for thinking art has a special connection with creativity: it is the only school subject where creativity is an inherent part of the disciplinary structure. Art is the only subject that values creativity for its own sake, as a process and an explicit value. By contrast, in other school subjects, the focus is usually on finding a solution to a problem and not on the process itself. They value creativity because it leads to answers to problems, rather than for its own sake. Artists on the other hand are as much interested in the creative process as in the results. I believe these two reasons make art the most direct way to promote the kind of creativity in children that we need today.

What does this analysis suggest for teaching art? It seems compatible with a number of contemporary pedagogical practices. Briefly, here are a few.

The first is to have learners make artworks that address some real life problem. The problem should call for both art exploration and additional knowledge of the world. For example, I think there are age-appropriate versions of all of the problems I identified earlier. Ecological issues, for instance, are commonly studied in association with making artworks about them. This means that students should prepare for their artwork by doing research about the chosen problem, making careful observations, gathering relevant knowledge and allowing that to influence the artworks.

Another recommendation is that students should experiment with different media and should be encouraged to think about the strengths and weaknesses of those media for their project. Today, there are many more media available to artists – including installations, photography and video, and digital art – and many of them are readily accessible to children.

Another consequence is that students should sometimes work in groups, sharing perspectives, sketches, opinions and making artworks. In doing this,

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they should learn to be open to different perspectives, approaches, assumptions about both art and life. This includes considering the probable interpretations viewers as well as the views of their collaborators.

Lastly, I think it is good practice to ask more mature students sometimes to make a series of works on a theme, rather than making just one. This requires them to stay with their chosen medium and set of rules for a longer period, to explore their possibilities and become aware of the effects of the corral they represent.

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