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TEACHING CREATIVITY TO CHILDREN THROUGH THE PERFORMING ARTS: DEVISING

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Educators continue to emphasize that creativity is one of the most important skills our children should be learning in order to succeed in a post-industrial world.

Skills connected with creativity include: critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, empathy, curiosity, imagination, flexibility, ability to communicate with others, and the willingness to take risks and tolerate failure.

The author's twenty five years of experience in founding and running a performing arts program for children ages nine through fourteen supports the thesis that the best way to teach creativity is by giving children the experience of being creative.

In offering children opportunities to explore and become comfortable with these critical skills, arts education programs that focus on devising (creating original material) are particularly effective.

When children are taught the tools artists use to create original works in the fields of music, dance, and drama, and are given the freedom within a supervised structure to use these tools to create their own, original works, they begin making relationships between domains.

Manipulating the forms and structures of musical, narrative, and choreographic composition requires connecting conceptual thinking with kinesthetic experience.

Working across disciplines, children are able to experience the way elements of time and space interact, and they make choices that govern this interaction in order to achieve the group goal of a successful performance piece.

This kind of educational experience empowers children to believe in their own ability to create new structures. It requires them to explore ambiguity, to take risks, and by recognizing multiple perspectives, to learn to balance their individual choices with the group's decision. By teaching our students to think creatively, we teach them how to have confidence in their own ideas, and we give them valuable tools they can apply to all other areas of their lives.

Keywords: *Teaching creativity, Devising with children, Arts Education, Twenty first century skills.*

As we progress into the twenty first century, educators are emphasizing that creativity is one of the most important skills our children should be learning in order to succeed in a post-industrial world. Many books are being written on the subject of how to teach children to become *innovators*, in the hope that they will be leaders of the next technological revolutions that are sure to come. In the United States there is a strong emphasis on STEM education: Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. Tony Wagner, in his book *Creating Innovators* lists some of the skills that are crucial for success in our new global economy. They include: critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, empathy, curiosity, imagination, flexibility, ability to communicate with others, and the willingness to take risks and tolerate failure. These are qualities that are powerfully nourished by the arts, and some educators have insisted that the acronym STEAM should be used instead of STEM, to include Arts as a critical component of the curriculum.

T. Wagner admits that it is easier to “talk about how to kill creativity” [10, p. 23] than it is to identify how best to teach it. Indeed, educational systems have been structured to teach students quantifiable knowledge, a product that can be measured and assessed after it has been absorbed. In the new digital age, facts can be obtained instantaneously from the internet, significantly changing educational priorities. However, many school systems have resisted refocusing their efforts to teaching the creative process itself. It is much more difficult to assess how well students have assimilated a *process* than it is to test and assess a *product*. In spite of this resistance, I would maintain that progressive educators have known how to teach creativity since the days of the United States philosopher and educator, John Dewey [3], and that the arts have always had an important place in curriculum designed to teach children how to be creative. As A. Saebo, L. McCammon, and L. O’Farrell assert in their paper *Creative Teaching - Teaching Creativity*, “the best way to enhance creativity is through the process of being creative.” [9, p. 210]. In offering children opportunities to explore and become comfortable with the skills Wagner lists as critical, arts education programs that focus on devising original material are particularly effective.

How can we define creativity? Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi [1] describes creativity as “...the interaction between a person’s thoughts and a sociocultural context.” [1, p. 23] resulting in the ability to “...bring into existence something genuinely new that is valued enough to be added to the culture” [1, p. 25]. According to M. Csikszentmihalyi [1], human knowledge is conveyed by symbols “bundled” into discrete domains, such as calculus,

medicine, music, or law, each domain having its own set of rules; “its own system of notation” [1, p. 37]. The person who is able to learn the rules of a domain and successfully manipulate them will gain a certain level of facility within a chosen field. However, the person who can make connections *across* domains and freely manipulate a variety of sets of rules will not only gain in self-confidence, but will also be able to combine seemingly unrelated ideas into something new. This person will be able to grasp “the relationship between relationships” [1, p. 141], a quality that Daniel Pink [8], in his book *A Whole New Mind*, cites as equally crucial for successful conductors, composers, scientists, doctors, and chief executive officers of large corporations. The creative thinker recognizes patterns that recur within domains and can relate them across the boundaries of specific disciplines, making new connections between these various patterns and sometimes creating new domains altogether. This suggests that interdisciplinary work is extremely valuable in teaching creativity.

In *The Arts and Human Development*, Howard Gardner [6] describes the importance of play to human growth. During play “...the child may try out a variety of roles, define and solve problems, (and) understand more fully the structure and functioning of objects. In this sense, play is virtually synonymous with development, the route to competence” [6, p. 165]. Gardner describes art as a “goal directed form of play” [6, p. 166], during which a child becomes able to express his own life experiences perceiving, making, and feeling, through symbols. His growth and development will depend on his ability to gain greater experience with a variety of codes and styles, acquire a greater technical facility, develop “a finer appreciation of the interpersonal communication process” [6, p. 168] and an understanding for the subtleties of relationships between individuals. It is this progression performing arts programs that focus on devising strive to nurture.

When children are taught the tools artists use to create original works in the fields of music, dance, and drama, and are given the freedom to use these tools to create their own, original works, they begin making relationships between domains. Manipulating the forms and structures of musical, narrative, and choreographic composition requires connecting conceptual thinking with kinesthetic experience. Working across disciplines, children are able to experience the way elements of time and space interact, and they make choices that govern this interaction in order to achieve the group goal of a successful performance piece. This kind of educational experience empowers children to believe in their own ability to create new structures; it gives them self-confidence. This is the foundation for the creativity training used in the summer program I founded in 1990 at the

Polytechnic Preparatory Country Day School in Brooklyn, New York. The program successfully serves children aged nine through thirteen and the curriculum is centered on devising, that is, the creation of new material.

The program focuses on group creation of short, original, musical theatre performance pieces, providing the children with the opportunity to cross the barriers of various artistic domains and to draw connections between all of them. When children are offered the opportunity to devise their own material they learn how to work with ambiguity, they learn how to be flexible, and they learn how to work well together as a team. This in turn helps the children to develop strong problem solving skills and the ability to express their ideas effectively. Jessica Davis Hoffman [2], founder of the Arts In Education Program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education underscores this capacity for arts to encourage creativity in her book, *Why Our Schools Need the Arts*. “The arts enable students...to experience their own ability to invent and carry out change. (This) imagination...may serve students well in non-arts subjects, for example, in imagining alternative approaches to a science challenge” [2, p. 56]. These are skills that contribute to academic achievement and are crucial for success in *any* field in the twenty-first century.

In the program at Poly Prep, drama directors choose folk tales or myths from a wide variety of cultures. They tell a single tale to each group of children. The challenge for each group is to create a performance piece, structured with a beginning, middle and end, from this tale. The tale might be translated into a different time or place from its origin, depending on the group’s vision and on what aspects of the tale they feel are important. The children decide who the characters should be, create their dialogue, original songs (both melodies and lyrics), sections of dance or special physical movement, and the design elements of the set and costumes for the show. Theme and variation, exposition and development, canon, rhythmic variation, crescendo and decrescendo; all these compositional elements can be experienced equally through the media of dance, drama, vocal, and instrumental music. These are some of the structural tools that the children learn to manipulate. The adults model the collaborative process for the children, each one contributing to the creation of the piece through the media of his or her discipline. The task of creating the piece has no obvious solution; the children must work together to discover the best way to present their story to an audience. They must decide what aspects of the story are most important to include. There is a built in discipline of scheduled performances, so the work must be completed within a limited amount of time. The children will perform their own final product for several audiences

of both their peers and their families, so their involvement is intense. Their work is guided by the adult teaching artists, but the process is a collaboration and each group experience is unique, determined by the dynamics of the children with the material and with each other.

In choosing successful staff members for our program it has been important to find artists who are highly skilled in manipulating the rules, procedures, and symbols of their unique domain, be it dance, drama, music, or design. In addition, they should be both performers and creators in their own right. Music directors must also be composers. Dance teachers should not only perform themselves, but also choreograph their own work with adults. Drama directors devise and write their own original material with professional actors in addition to their work with children. Therefore they understand the creative process first hand and can be true *collaborators* with their students as well as instructors. Of course they take an active hand in guiding the flow of the process. But they do this by establishing an experimental framework within which the students can explore. The teachers pose the artistic questions in such a way that the students will be able to find a variety of answers. It is then up to the group to choose which solutions will best serve the needs of their production.

With all children in the group participating in each part of the creative process, children are able to find outlets for their individual talents, as well as to discover talents they didn't know they had. Each student gets the chance to try on many different roles as they work on their scenes. Characters are built collectively through the ideas of many performers. If the group and the director decide that something worked when one student played the role, the next person to try that part will keep the previous stage business and then add his or her own new ideas. The dialogue is rarely written down, leaving space for changes as each new person plays a scene. The only materials that need to be codified are the melodies and lyrics the children create for their songs. Children write down trial lyrics during group sessions or on their own at home. Often, too much material is created, and the group must edit out pieces that they liked, presenting everyone with a difficult choice.

Throughout the creative process, and especially at the beginning, students are continually assessing their collective work. Our teaching artists help the children to balance their individual choices with the group's decisions. First of all, the teachers and the program's counselors must provide an environment in which all students feel they can trust each other, so that even a shy student will feel free to take the risk of expressing his ideas to the larger group. Group trust exercises, daily games and interactions during free time carefully guided by the staff provide a space in which each

student feels valued and recognized within the program. Not every idea will be accepted by the larger group, but if one member of the group does not feel comfortable sharing her idea, the group has lost a valuable resource. The children must decide how to "voice" their piece. Where should the story be expressed by a single speaker? Where would it better be expressed by duets (in dialogue or in song) or by trios, quartets, or larger groups? This adds complexity to the element of group dynamics, and calls on children's personal, or emotional intelligence as they navigate these decisions. To prepare the group, the first few days of the program are devoted to team building exercises. To successfully complete these exercises, each person must balance their own private vision with that of the others, and find a way to compromise so that everyone is included. Those who are rigid and who have trouble giving up their own vision or imagining new ways of doing things will have difficulties with exercises like these, but this is one way to learn what Tony Wagner [10] describes as "team based leadership" [10, p. 22] in his book *The Global Achievement Gap*. The hierarchical process of simply taking direction from a boss (or a teacher) gives way to a collaborative team process, in which leadership takes place through influence and consensus.

T. Wagner [10] cites the need to be flexible, to take risks, and even to embrace failure as a part of the creative process. Not every idea will work, but it is often impossible to know this unless the idea is first tried out. This is true in the business and scientific communities as well as in the performing arts. The children learn that it is acceptable, even necessary, to fail from time to time, and that often the outcome will *not* be clear, and the process will be clouded with ambiguity.

At the end of each week, there is time for each group to share some of their new material by performing it for the other groups in the program. This assessment process mirrors the actual workshop and "preview" process used by artists to refine their work in the professional world. It offers the children a chance to assess their own work and imagine how it could be improved. Children are asked to serve as audience members for the other groups and also assess the work of their peers. Teachers introduce a piece by asking the audience to watch for key elements that the performers are exploring. For example, the audience might be asked if the narrative is clear to them, or if they can understand the dialogue or lyrics. They might be asked to comment on the way the piece was staged, or if characters have been clearly developed, or still seem unformed. Is an audience amused by what is supposed to be a serious moment? The way the questions are posed helps the children learn how to comment constructively on what they have seen in a

supportive rather than critical manner. Many times, groups have decided to change elements of their pieces based on the assessments they have received from their peers in these sessions of sharing. In addition, the children are living the intensity of the performance experience and learning how to cope with the new level of tension, excitement or anxiety it may provoke in them. They are also deepening their sense of reliance on each other as teammates in facing the audience. If there have been tensions between group members, they now understand clearly that they must overcome their differences and work more closely together in order for their performance to succeed.

The ability of each child to communicate his or her thoughts and feelings is developed through the basic training in drama that takes place through the process of creating the performances. The use of the face, voice, gesture, and body language in the expression of emotions is examined and explored. Children who have identified and practiced the expression of our various human emotions are better equipped to interact effectively in a wider variety of life situations. As Howard Gardner [6] states in his seminal book, *Frames of Mind*, “The less a person understands his own feelings, the more he will fall prey to them. The less a person understands the feelings, the responses, and the behavior of others, the more likely he will interact inappropriately with them and therefore fail to secure his proper place within the larger community” [6, p. 254]. The contemporary psychologist Paul Ekman [4] has made a business of offering classes to corporate executives on the ability to read people’s thoughts and emotions through their facial expressions and body language. His research is widely available in his many books, *Emotions Revealed* among others. This basic training should be a part of every child’s education, so that they are confident and flexible in their ability to negotiate the public expression of thoughts and emotions. The ability to read and understand social signals is essential to effective communication and is crucial in the development of empathy.

When children themselves are consciously choosing to portray characters with strong emotions they are manipulating the elements of human expression and are able to safely play with levels of feeling from the extreme to the mild without risking the repercussions that might come from expressing these emotions in other contexts. John Dewey recognized this need in his book, *Art as Experience*. When emotional impulse “takes the indirect road of expression instead of the direct road of discharge...the effect is to give objective fulfillment to the emotion” [3, p. 81]. Releasing repressed emotions and expressing them in a safe environment can often liberate children from the desire to engage in anti-social behavior in other contexts. When a child can get attention by playing a villain on the stage, he can focus on other ways of distinguishing himself in his life at home or in school.

In creating characters for themselves, children frequently play their idealized versions of themselves. Perhaps they have been studying ballet and see themselves in the role of a beautiful dancer. For a few weeks they are allowed the satisfaction of living that dream, and even if they are never destined to become a professional dancer the happiness of the experience is deeply fulfilling for them. Others, who are shy in their regular school personas, choose outspoken roles and allow themselves to successfully take the focus of a large audience. The stage role gives them permission to try out a different persona. When they return to school, they feel more comfortable speaking up on their own behalf when called upon to do so, even if they still remain undemonstrative by nature. The self-confidence that these children develop stays with them when they leave the program and return to their normal academic environments. They are freer to accept their weaknesses and better able to recognize and build on their strengths.

Arts programs and teachers are often judged by the quantifiable technical excellence of their students. Creativity training through the arts differs in significant ways from programs designed to make students successful *competitors* in arts disciplines. In performing arts curriculum that focus on creativity, children will learn and improve their technical skills, but this will be only *one* aspect of the program. Instrumental programs that focus on virtuosity of technique, but which do not provide opportunities for students to compose and play their own works do not empower students to express their own ideas. The same can be said for similar dance and drama programs. Students whose technical abilities may not be as strong are quickly discouraged and can be left with negative feelings about their work. Students who are successful may experience such pressure to compete that they, too, are left with negative feelings. If self-expression is not encouraged or valued, students get the message that their own experiences and perceptions are not important. A hierarchy is set up in which the student is always receiving directions from others, but never gets to experience what it would be like to create a direction for himself. Without this experience it is much more difficult to make the leap from *follower* to *leader* in later life, whatever field the student may choose. These opportunities to create original works are not intended only for students who might become professional performers. The focus is on releasing the inherent creativity and self-confidence of *all* students.

The American educator Eliot Eisner [5] states that “The problem in our schools is that activities whose syntactical structure is rule-abiding dominate the curriculum to the virtual exclusion of...structure-seeking

activities....Following rules and applying algorithms do not match the kinds of problems with which most people must deal in life....Life's problems almost always have more than one solution..." [5, p. 28]. In guiding students to create their own unique structures, teachers should be able to live with ambiguity themselves, and rather than impose their solutions to a problem, allow the children to find their own. Successful teachers come to their classes with a high degree of organization and structure, which they then proceed to alter and adapt to fit the children's contributions, so that each class is a creation of both the students and the teacher. The teacher expects that the children will have had certain experiences as a result of the class, but what the children create in response to that experience is left open ended. The *process* can be repeated endlessly. The *product*, however, will always be different.

By its very nature, a program such as this does not produce easily quantifiable data as provided through competitive tests or audition scores. There is no single answer or solution to the problem of creating something from nothing. As Eliot Eisner [5] points out in *The Kind of Schools We Need*:

"When we care about the journey, and the student's experience...when we recognize that learning...requires multiple sources of data, multiple forms of representation, and the use of multiple intelligences...Statistical comparisons may be relevant for some outcomes but surely not for the ones we are likely to care about the most" [5, p.114].

Our educational system remains torn between the desire to assess standardized products of quantifiable knowledge, and the desire to teach creativity. But teaching creativity requires that we structure and advocate for a *process* that will always produce a different *product*.

At its first world conference on Arts Education in 2006, UNESCO proclaimed "Creativity is our hope" (www.unesco.org) and affirmed the goal of fostering creative educations for both developed and developing countries. Investing in arts education programs such as the one described in this paper is one way to achieve this goal. Since I founded the program at Polytechnic Preparatory Country Day School, others like it have been instituted in New York City and in many other states and cities in the United States, seeking to foster in children "...a willingness to imagine possibilities...explore ambiguity...and recognize and accept multiple perspectives and resolutions" [5, p. 99], qualities that E. Eisner [5] identifies as fundamental to the artistic process and crucial to the development of

creativity. When we involve students in artistic problem solving, we make them partners in the learning process. Because they are creating their own work rather than performing someone else's, they are deeply engaged. Instead of being told what to think, the students must discover answers for themselves through their own critical thinking. They must be flexible and willing to take risks and tolerate failure. By teaching our students to think creatively, we teach them how to have confidence in their own ideas, and we give them valuable tools they can apply to all other areas of their lives.

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НАВЧАННЯ ТВОРЧИМ ЗДІБНОСТЯМ ДІТЕЙ ЗАСОБАМИ ВИКОНАВЧОГО МИСТЕЦТВА: РОЗРОБКА

Со́ня К. Беєр

Педагоги продовжують наголошувати, що творчість є однією з найбільш важливих навичок, які наші діти повинні здобути, щоб бути успішними в постіндустріальному світі.

Навички, пов'язані з творчістю, включають: критичне мислення, вирішення проблем, співпрацю, співпереживання, допитливість, уяву,

гнуцькість, вміння спілкуватися з іншими людьми, а також готовність взяти на себе ризик та потерпіти поразку.

Двадцять п'ять років досвіду автора у створенні та впровадженні в життя програми виконавчого мистецтва для дітей віком від дев'яти до чотирнадцяти років підтверджують тезу про те, що найкращий спосіб навчити дітей бути творчими – дати їм можливість творити.

Освітні програми в галузі мистецтв, що зосереджені на розробках (створеннях оригінальних матеріалів) вирізняються особливою ефективністю, оскільки вони пропонують дітям нагоду досліджувати та звикати до цих необхідних вмінь.

Коли діти вивчають інструменти, котрі митці використовують для створення оригінальних робіт у галузях музики, танцю та драми, і їм надається свобода у використанні цих інструментів для творення своїх власних оригінальних робіт під наглядом наставника, вони починають будувати відносини між доменами.

Маніпулювання формами та структурами музичної, описової та хореографічної композицій вимагає підключення концептуального мислення з кінестетичним досвідом.

Працюючи в різних дисциплінах, діти здатні відчувати, як саме елементи часу і простору взаємодіють між собою, і вони роблять вибір, який регулює цю взаємодію для досягнення спільної мети – успішного виконання твору мистецтва.

Такий освітній досвід наділяє дітей наснагою повірити у свої власні можливості для створення нових структур. Це вимагає від них досліджувати неясності, ризикувати, і, визнаючи різні точки зору, вчитися збалансовувати свої індивідуальні варіанти з груповим вирішенням. Навчаючи наших студентів мислити творчо, ми вчимо їх набувати впевненості в своїх власних ідеях, і ми даємо їм цінні засоби, які вони можуть застосовувати в усіх сферах свого життя.

Ключові слова: навчання творчим здібностям, розробка з дітьми, мистецька освіта, навички двадцять першого століття.

ОБУЧЕНИЕ ТВОРЧЕСКИМ СПОСОБНОСТЯМ ДЕТЕЙ СРЕДСТВАМИ ИСПОЛНИТЕЛЬСКОГО ИСКУССТВА: РАЗРАБОТКА

Соня К. Бзер

Педагоги продолжают подчеркивать, что творчество является одним из наиболее важных навыков, которые наши дети должны получить, чтобы быть успешными в постиндустриальном мире.

Навыки, связанные с творчеством, включают: критическое мышление, решение проблем, сотрудничество, сопереживание, любознательность,

воображение, гибкость, умение общаться с другими людьми, а также готовность взять на себя риск и потерпеть поражение.

Двадцать пять лет опыта автора в создании и внедрении в жизнь программы исполнительного искусства для детей от девяти до четырнадцати лет подтверждают тезис о том, что лучший способ научить детей быть творческими – дать им возможность творить.

Образовательные программы в области искусств, сосредоточены на разработках (создании оригинальных материалов) отличаются особой эффективностью, поскольку они предлагают детям возможность исследовать и привыкать к этим необходимым умениям.

Когда дети изучают инструменты, которые художники используют для создания оригинальных работ в области музыки, танца и драмы, и им предоставляется свобода в использовании этих инструментов для создания своих собственных оригинальных работ под надзором наставника, они начинают строить отношения между доменами.

Манипулирование формами и структурами музыкальной, описательной и хореографической композиций требует подключения концептуального мышления с кинестетическими опытом.

Работая в различных дисциплинах, дети способны почувствовать, как элементы времени и пространства взаимодействуют между собой, и они делают выбор, который регулирует это взаимодействие для достижения общей цели – успешного выполнения произведения искусства.

Такой образовательный опыт наделяет детей воодушевлением поверить в свои собственные возможности для создания новых структур. Это требует от них исследовать неясности, рисковать, и, признавая различные точки зрения, учиться балансировать свои индивидуальные варианты с групповым решением. Обучая наших студентов мыслить творчески, мы учим их обретать уверенность в своих собственных идеях, и мы даем им ценные средства, которые они могут применять во всех сферах своей жизни.

Ключевые слова: обучение творческим способностям, разработка с детьми, художественное образование, навыки двадцать первого века.

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