



Creativity and Education*

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Abstract

There is a call for increased creativity on the part of individuals, groups and society as a whole. For when creativity is blocked the mind becomes frustrated, even angry, violent and destructive. But why should creativity appear to be so compromised in our modern world? By contrast creativity appears to be totally natural and spontaneous in children; in their play, dressing up, make believe and even play fighting. Why then does it become impoverished as they become adults? Creativity in children is its own reward but as they enter school they find themselves rewarded for the work they do. Soon seeking approval and reward becomes their motivation and so they begin to look at the work of others for clues as to the rules of success. The paper discusses ways in which children's creativity can be fostered rather than blocked.

Creativity has become one of those “buzz” words that everyone gives lip services to. Put the word “creativity” into the title of a book and it will be a best seller. People ask: How can creativity be fostered? Is it possible to give exercises for creativity? A program? A system of education? Is creativity something that can be trained or taught?

You can certainly train people to carry out tasks in a better way, acquire new techniques and skills, and to accumulate new knowledge. But the whole essence of creativity lies in its freshness, its freedom, its newness. Creativity is often unexpected and exciting. It involves seeing things in new ways and breaking rules. Creativity may result in something radically different – e.g. Picasso/ Stravinsky, or it may involve the unfolding of an old, established form with a total freshness. e.g. Bach and the fugue.

I would argue that there can be no program, no system of training or education for creativity – whatever boundary we draw around it, something else that is totally creative will emerge in a different place. Creativity is not a skill; it is not a sort of muscle of the brain, or a technology of the mind. Creativity makes use of knowledge and skill but that is not where its roots lie.

I have always felt that creativity is perfectly natural. We should not ask how to be creative, rather we must question why we are not being creative! Creativity is the essence of life, of evolution, of consciousness, of nature and of matter. The universe itself is in a constant act of creation so, as its children, we should ask ourselves – Why, in such a creative universe, do societies and some individuals at times appear to be stupid, dull, destructive and uncreative?

* Talk given to an Ottawa group of teachers and parents interested in establishing alternative form of education on 23 Feb 1989. The talk began with a short introduction to the author's background and about the sense of wonder at nature that seems to have been with him from an early age.

– Or are we deceived? Are people really dull – or is their creativity simply being shown in other ways? Are we all, in fact, creative – and is it just that there are certain blocks which seem to frustrate us in certain areas of our lives? Do we all have the potential for creativity no matter how old we are?

1. The Child

The whole essence of the infant is creative – learning to walk, leaning to talk, word games, songs, play. Imagine creating a world of your imagination and playing with it for hours on end. Physicists I have talked to say that creating a theory is just like that – it is a play of ideas within the mind. Playing with mud, your food, with fabrics, with paints – this is totally natural to the child and something that Picasso could do this all his life. Dressing up, playing jokes, play-fighting – it’s all an immense energy of the mind. It is hard to stop creativity in a young child. Creativity is an energy that constantly bubbles out of a child, even if he or she is forced to sit at a school desk for hours on end. You can’t make your child creative, it simply is creative. The most difficult thing in the world is to get out of the way and let this creativity happen.

“Creativity is unconditioned; it is its own reward.”

2. Blocks

The thrill, the imagination, the play of childhood passes – although for some it never really goes. But what has happened, why does the world become so dull for some of us? Punishment and cruelty are obvious answers. And the low value that adults put on play and the high value they put on learning, knowledge, technique, seriousness and making a living.

But praise and reward can be just as serious a block as punishment. In *Science, Order and Creativity* David Bohm and I tell Desmond Morris’s story of the chimps that loved to play with paint and produced some very interesting patterns of form and colour. But once the chimps were rewarded they lost interest in their paintings and began to produce the minimum acceptable. Seeking reward can be a significant block – knowing that something you or your friends are doing is valuable and then trying to repeat it. Children lose the fun of painting and begin to look at what their fellows are doing – this can be an important phase in leaning, or it can be the first step to becoming over compliant to external values and rules.

As adults we have internalized authority; we have roles, models, values that are not our own, goals that are placed upon us. All this can destroy creativity. The deadline, the writer’s block, the program’s goals – all can kill.

By contrast, creativity is unconditioned; it is its own reward. But external goals, rules, etc. that become internalized can destroy creativity and cripple the mind. I’d like to mention the idea of an “undetected brain damage” which is the result of pain, anger and frustration which all conspire to destroy the subtle nature of the brain and make it dull and mechanical.

When creativity is blocked the mind becomes terribly frustrated. It may become angry, violent and destructive. Or it may become dull, mechanical, depressed. Is our whole society suffering from a creativity that is frustrated?

In advocating creativity and the joy of play I am not advocating anarchy. I do not mean that there are no constraints, no rules, or morals to be placed on a creative person. Creative minds have always become engaged in a dialogue with rules and structures. But these rules are never arbitrary or mechanical, they are established by the medium itself – paint, words, sounds, physical processes, the needs of others, the health of the planet, the fabric of society. Bach chose the limitations of the fugue, Wordsworth wrote sonnets, theoretical physicists must constantly submit their creations to the court of experiment. Creativity is not anarchy, yet it is free and unconditioned in the way it engages of the rules and a particular form and in so doing transforms and enlarges their meaning and significance. Again let me emphasize that while creativity must make use of rules, techniques, skills etc.– these are not the origin of creativity, they are simply its tools.

3. Further Blocks

Our civilization praises the new, the novel, the unexpected. This can be another block. Let us ask, does creativity always have to involve the novel and different? Or can creativity be a revisitation, something that is immanent in the known, something fresh – like a new loaf of bread which looks exactly the same as every other loaf but has a fresh smell and taste about it. So we should not feel that we have to be different. Simply trying to do something different each time can be another block to creativity.

Creativity, to many people means production – I have to write a poem, I have to get down to a new novel, I have to come up with a better theory. Creativity may indeed lead to new structures and forms, to new objects in the world. But is that its deepest essence or simply the byproduct of its bubbling energy? I would suggest that creativity is a mind that is fresh, alert, sensitive. It is a mind that is not dull, mechanical, afraid, restricted. Creativity is an energy which moves through the whole body. Creativity can simply be seeing each day as new and fresh and full of potential. Creativity can exist in relationships, in the way we see nature, in the way we conduct our lives. Must creativity always mean paintings, theories, symphonies, poems and novels? Isn't it creative to teach and to learn? Again, when we think of creativity in children, we must not impose all these goals and presuppositions upon them.

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What does the world need today? More novels, theories and paintings? They are certainly significant but I would also suggest that we need a totally different form of living, a way of facing the problems that plague our whole planet? We need teachers, politicians, parents who are highly creative. We need people whose minds are not damaged, who are alert, sensitive, who listen and watch both themselves and others.

4. Challenge

We ask how our children can be more creative. I would suggest that the first step is to allow ourselves to be creative. To allow that energy to bubble up from below. To play. To act in a way that is free and unconditioned and not directed by anything outside itself.

The hardest thing is to allow this creativity in ourselves and in others. Can we really stand back and let it happen? Not encourage it, reward it, direct it, structure it, give it goals. Can we simply leave the child alone to play, to take things in its own way?

Creativity is so important to us that we find we can't leave it alone when we see it in others – we can't allow our children simply to be themselves. And so we must praise, reward, direct and intervene. We all know a better way to do things, an easier path – and all this does is to divert the creative action from its source by introducing something external. It is so easy to “help” the child, to enlarge its world. But if we are all to play we must learn the importance of having the total freedom to be wrong, to make mistakes, to push something to its limits and then throw it away. (It's said that the test of a really good mathematician is how many bad proofs they produce!) The teacher and the parent must develop courage and creativity. There are no rules, no one can tell us when to step in or when to stand back.

Can we learn to be creative in the presence of the other? Can we learn to be creative to ourselves? Can we allow that play to take place without interference? Can we be watchful, alert and sensitive? Can we know the moment to engage with the other, to express our excitement, to share our skill and knowledge? In the end, being a parent or a teacher has to be a creative act in its own right. The creative parent allows the child that security and solitude in which to explore the universe in a creative way. The most important freedom that the parent or teacher can allow is the freedom to play and to make mistakes. But can we act as creative parents to ourselves? Can we allow ourselves the security and freedom to explore, to create and to make mistakes?

Finally let us ask:

- What do we really want to do?
- What is the most fun for us in life?
- Do we really want to do what we are doing now?
- Can we allow ourselves to play?
- What do we give the most value to in our lives?
- What is most important to us?
- Does play or fun in others make us uneasy?
- Must everything we do have an end or goal?
- Does the world truly appear fresh and new to us each morning?
- If we were given one year to live what would we do?

Question from the audience on the role of authority figures, particularly the tradition of the guru:

Answer: This, I believe, raises a difficult question – the role of the guru in the creative transformation of consciousness. Ancient and respected traditions place emphasis on giving oneself to the guru – of placing oneself in the guru’s hands and not attempting the journey on one’s own. The guru guides, admonishes, confronts, presents paradoxes and loves, so that by some charismatic power the consciousness of the student is transformed. In a sense, to give oneself to the guru seems to contradict the very notion of creativity I have proposed. The guru guides, admonishes, corrects and offers enlightenment. Is this really compatible with the ideas personal growth and internal transformation? Or is this interaction with the guru a form of dialectic in which one transcends one’s own world view through a constant engagement with the guru as “a force of nature”? These questions remain to be resolved.

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