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## Creatology Creativise Creatovate

**Susan Rowe Harrison**

*Artist and educator*

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We all seem to agree that creativity is good for us. Nations are racing to produce (reproduce) 'creative thinkers' who can sustain their ability to compete in a global economy and are demanding that educators deliver. And yet the meaning of creativity and imaginative thinking is elusive. The arts are expected to promote creativity, but what factors ensure that they do and why? Do educators, social scientists, psychologists, parents, and policymakers share the same definition of creativity? Is it possible to 'creativise' our populations? More importantly, do our schools value creativity? Do children and their parents and caregivers value it?

Finding a working definition of creativity is difficult, especially one that takes into account the idiosyncratic blend of an individual's heredity – genetic and cultural – their emotional disposition, skills and environment. Psychologist Mikhail Csikszentmihalyi looks at these factors to locate rather than define creativity. Csikszentmihalyi situates creativity in the relationship between an individual – the unique chemistry of their gifts, ambitions, and eccentricities – and the cultural authorities who establish the benchmark for works produced in a culture.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, Csikszentmihalyi shifts creativity from the exclusive domain of the individual to the shared relationship between individual and the field. While this interpretation has exceptions, Csikszentmihalyi acknowledges the power structures that exist to define

original thinking in cultures.

Neurologist and writer Oliver Sacks takes a more independent and optimistic tack by citing the internal mechanisms at work in problem-solving. He describes creativity as coming 'from a greater depth than any reproduction.' He further speculates that creativity is motivated by a 'dissatisfaction with the status quo,' and by an inherent tendency for 'skill to become creative.'<sup>2</sup> While I like the broadness of this definition, the term 'status quo' can be loaded. I would prefer to use a working definition of status quo that is defined across a vast range of contexts from the global forum to a personal one. Because the term status quo is generally used in political contexts relating to class, culture, and governance, we read Sack's definition on a global playing field. Had Sacks described creativity as a 'dissatisfaction with the way things are', we would be more apt to apply his definition across a broader range of domains to encompass the arts, science, politics, belief systems, class and social mores to such everyday systems as family, school, peer group structures, or even personal beliefs and habits.

Artists often challenge the existing order of things in their work. Artist Rebecca Horn describes the dissatisfaction her protagonist finds with society and himself in *Concert for Anarchy*:

*'The piano in my installation for Concert for Anarchy embodies the purity of a music which the artist is no longer able to create within the bounds of his real life; in the reality of his artistic life the artist seeks out disruptive factors which will preserve the purity of musical experience in his inner self. This represents a form of total rejection of the surrounding society, enabling anarchy to be lived out in the imagination.'*<sup>3</sup>

Horn fashions a dialogue between society and the self that results in her protagonist's rejection of the 'surrounding society' and which ultimately leads to the creation of the protagonist's artwork. Interestingly, the conflict between the individual and his status quo in her abstract fable evidences the 'dissatisfaction with the status quo' that Oliver Sacks suggests gives rise to creativity. Another example of personal circumstance motivating creativity can be drawn from the following passage in Paule Marshall's book *The Fisher King*. The grandson of a jazz musician is showing his cousins some of his drawings:

*'Who was he guarding?... He told them both. He had never before told anyone, not Hattie or Madame Molineaux or Jean-Jacques, but he suddenly found himself telling his cousins that his namesake grandfather lived inside the castles and fortresses, placed there by him for safekeeping. And not only was he safe, but he was healed as well, all the bloody head wounds he had suffered in the Metro completely healed, his head, his face restored to that of his billboard image above the entrance to the Club Bellepoque. "My Grandfather's inside and I'm on guard" was all he actually said. "I move him to each one I draw."'*<sup>4</sup>

The young protagonist challenges the existing order of things in his world through the imaginary fortresses he creates to protect and heal the memory of his grandfather.

Psychologist Howard Gardner offers a useful list of external conditions that can encourage creative thinking in individuals. He speculates that the following situations may contribute to creativity in people:

1. Exposure to indefatigable, risk-taking people
2. The opportunity to excel in at least one area or domain
3. Discipline to support mastering a domain in youth
4. An environment which challenges but does not defeat a young person
5. Peers who are willing to experiment and are not deterred by failure
6. Late birth order or a family that tolerates rebellion
7. An obstacle that makes the person marginal within his/her group.<sup>5</sup>

Gardner's practical approach is instructive in a learning setting, and particularly through the arts, though not limited to it. An instructor or parent can create an environment that 'challenges but does not defeat', where 'peers are willing to experiment and risk failure' but also to excel through encouragement and discipline. Further, a proactive educator can expose students to risk-taking individuals through meaningful cultural and institutional collaborations, artist-in-residency programs, through study and dialogue and, in the case of an exceptional educator, by personal example. These individuals – mentors – whose enthusiasm and willingness to share their knowledge with a young person through dialogue, are cited as contributing to a young person's sustained interest in participating in the arts.<sup>6</sup> One cannot underestimate the value of an enthusiastic artist, art teacher or administrator in a cultural programme, even one who lacks significant experience.<sup>7</sup> One student's comments support the role of the enthusiastic mentor: 'I think [school] has helped, yes, especially – well, it's probably last year that it influenced me the most because of the teacher I had, but I am not really as keen now because she has left – she was like a role model in art for me.' (male, 14)<sup>8</sup>

Before we can encourage creative thinking through the arts, we must first attempt to negotiate some of the barriers to exposure to the arts such as language, cultural differences, fear, and economic and practical concerns. RAND, a non-profit think tank in the United States, has found that a main predictor of arts attendance is early exposure to the arts, typically more common in families with greater wealth and education. This creates what arts consultant Neill Archer Roan calls a 'self-reinforcing system of exclusion', where, as Bourdieu concluded, a 'consensus of meaning' constructs and maintains the cultural authority of the dominant classes on the one hand and the 'cultural arbitrary' of the lower classes on the other.<sup>9</sup> British teenagers seem to agree, particularly in response to the question, 'Who goes to art venues?':

*'Arty people – I think you have to be interested to go, so people who are interested in the artist and art generally,' (female, 18). 'My perception is that it's the rich. They like more classical stuff and not the more modern stuff,' (male, 17). 'I looked around when I went in there, it was definitely older people. There weren't many teenagers going round. There was actually a section which was 'Icons of Pop,' so that attracted lots of teenagers and young people. In the big main bit with pictures of Jesus and stuff like that,*

*you wouldn't get many in there,' (male, 17).<sup>10</sup>*

Pierre Bourdieu calls this shared meaning 'habitus', a concept that embraces habit, but also heredity, and is developed on kinds of capital. According to Bourdieu, capital takes the form of knowledge (cultural), of economy (wealth), and of society (connections and networks) and these forms of capital vary according to birthright or ability.<sup>11</sup> As we have inherited or acquired different capital in different degrees by extension of knowledge, wealth, connections and networks, we possess different dialects and accents, separate languages, classes, and the specialized language that can confer a position of 'perceived cultural authority.'<sup>12</sup> This perceived cultural authority can contribute to intimidation and alienation in a museum or gallery and in the classroom. Of the barriers cited, fear is perhaps the most difficult to overcome. The RAND study found that many low-income visitors approach arts institutions with fears over proper dress and behaviour in institutions. Some even find the architecture of the buildings intimidating. Other factors that deter participation in the arts by people living in poverty are the very real costs of childcare, transportation, time off from work, and perceived cultural relevance.<sup>13</sup> The barriers to participation in the arts are quite powerful, especially for those who have inherited them.<sup>14</sup>

Arts subjects are expected to promote creativity but our definitions of arts-based approaches to learning need to be clarified before we can determine whether and how these approaches transfer to other subject areas. While there is a skill-based component to art, art making should not be limited to this approach. At worst, the result-driven, skill-based approach to making art can close down students' perception rather than challenge and expand it.

*'The history of drawing in the public schools of North America has always been problematic for artists and arts educators. "Drawing was introduced into Canadian public schools... linked... with penmanship, utility and mechanical and industrial progress... nothing about creativity... Drawing was a means of social control and cultural hegemony" If student work using arts elements is thought of as simply illustration, a mechanical act, a utilitarian task without specific or aesthetic dimensions or intentions, is it fair to describe the instruction as 'arts-based' or 'arts-infused'?'<sup>15</sup>*

Educators can negotiate result-driven learning to create an interesting and challenging context for work that is relevant to the lives and learning styles of young people. Because art is situated and contextual, educators tend to carry these characteristics into a learning setting. In studies that look at how good teaching differs from good art teaching, researchers have found that good arts teachers are more inclined to construct their teaching style on an understanding and knowledge of their students and their lives outside of school than are educators in other subjects.<sup>16</sup> In this way, arts teachers are in a unique position to establish the trust necessary to encourage individual experimentation and growth. Pupils themselves are often resources for relevant contexts, which in the hands of an inventive teacher can be transformed into a learning opportunity that gives students the option to experiment, grow and take risks within a project.

When collaborations begin badly, negative dialogues can still provoke meaningful discussion. If nothing else, it is a signal that pupils care enough about a project to complain about it. This was the case in a six week project that I was part of in Manhattan. The collaboration, an initiative of the Dia Center's Arts Education Program in New York, paired Ianthe Jackson's eighth grade math class at The School for the Physical City<sup>17</sup>, with a teaching artist – Janet Cohen – during an exhibition of Alfred Jensen's paintings called *Concordance*.<sup>18</sup> Because students behaved badly during the initial gallery visit to the Dia Center, the classroom teacher made arrangements for a second visit to the gallery. On the return visit, students openly resented making another trip to the gallery and felt that they should not be limited in what they could view there. In anticipation of a rough audience, the classroom teacher provided worksheets for students to use in the galleries and they clearly worked to focus the students. We began our discussion in the gallery with a student reading from Jensen's artist's statement<sup>19</sup> and then discussed a bit about the artist's life. Afterwards, we looked at the paintings together and talked about them. Some students were disengaged, but most participated in the discussion. Some even questioned the work or offered their own explanations of its meaning. Although the visit had a difficult beginning, our determination to build discussion around the work helped to establish trust among some of the students. They began to take verbal risks in discussing their thoughts about the paintings – what they meant and why they could or could not be categorized as works of art.

In the school, conceptual artist Janet Cohen introduced and connected the personal systems that she develops in her drawings to the idiosyncratic personal systems used by Alfred Jensen in the Dia exhibit.<sup>20</sup> Both artists share an interest in symbology. For Cohen it is baseball and for Jensen, maths, astronomy, geology, ancient China and Latin America, Chinese calligraphy and Lao-Tzu's Tao Te Ching. To extend the students' experience, Cohen asked them to create drawings in their journals which charted dynamic systems in their lives and communities. The workshop did not seek to build traditional skills in representational drawing, but rather aimed to develop an understanding of charting and diagramming in maths through art. Students charted a basketball game, a karate class, the skate park, and their mother at a laundromat (laundrette). One student even charted the sounds in his living room – a strange but interesting response to the project, which, given more time, could have been explored in ways beyond a two-dimensional format. Unrestricted by purely skills-based knowledge, the teaching artist worked to unravel some of the students' rigid ideas about art and, as a result, she helped to sharpen their analytical abilities.

Even though students initially objected to the project, the series of workshops caught them off-guard. Ironically, they were shocked by an art where technique is not always the goal. As Janet remarked in an email conversation we had after the workshop: '...it's important to introduce kids to as much off the beaten track/non-mainstream works as possible before they get stuck into categorizing what they see/experience.'<sup>21</sup>

One student was bothered by the idea of conceptual art and argued tirelessly that art represented people or things but not ideas. We talked

about her ideas in the context of the works that we had seen at the gallery and in class. While the pupil held fast to her ideas about art, she asked to paint her dynamic system rather than drawing it. We appreciated the student's spirit and commitment to the project and encouraged her to follow it through using any materials that she saw fit. In some ways, her project linked more specifically to Jensen's and Cohen's work. While Jensen was a painter and Cohen primarily draws, this student synthesised the work that she had experienced by choosing to draw her system in paint.

An educator aiming to inspire creative thinking should provide enough choice to encourage pupils to experiment and, therefore, to risk failure, while at the same time recognize and acknowledge an imaginative solution when it occurs. Pupils are often creative in ways that are not arts-bound; they often imagine a better shortcut or an alternative way to learn a skill. By recognizing an alternative solution, an educator encourages the pupil to continue to take risks and to challenge a task without feeling defeated.

In order for educators to encourage experimentation in a learning setting, they must be given the time to experiment themselves. Curriculum requirements, assessments and inspections must support meaningful partnerships and professional development opportunities where educators are challenged by new ideas and have the time to steep those new experiences so that they may transfer them, in a meaningful way, to a learning setting.<sup>22</sup> And, they must listen to the voices of those who create:

*'In photography, creation is a quick business – an instant, a gush, a response – putting the camera up to the eye's line of fire, snatching with that economical little box whatever it was that surprised you, catching it in midair, without tricks, without letting it get away... That moment, that fraction of a second, is valuable for the freshness of its impression – but does it preclude a more studied experience? Is it possible to find that same freshness if you stay for a long time in one spot? Whether you are on the move or in one place, in order to show a country or a situation, somehow you need to have established close working relationships, to be supported by a human community; living takes time, roots form slowly. Thus that fraction of a moment can be the fruit of a long acquaintance, or one of surprise.'*<sup>23</sup>  
[Henri Cartier Bresson]

*'Yes, drawings are thought feathers, they are ideas that I seize in mid flight and put down on paper. All my thoughts are visual. But the subjects of my drawings are often not translated into sculpture until several years later. As a result, there are a lot of things that appear in drawings but are never explored further.'*<sup>24</sup>

[Louise Bourgeois]

*'For Richard Tuttle, the ability to make significant art comes about as the melding of a peculiar kind of informed curiosity, a bent towards the aesthetic, and a natural physical dexterity. He defines art as "...the ultimate democratic practice.... an intelligence formed by a group and expressed by single practitioners."'*<sup>25</sup> [Kathleen Whitney and Richard Tuttle]

Much has been written about creativity in an attempt to define it and mandate its importance. But a lot of what we understand about creativity is intangible. An idea can appear in a flash that is the product of a lifetime of experience. Creativity is a strange gift, an interplay of genetics and environment that cannot be reproduced. Yet some aspects of creativity can be encouraged in a learning setting. I hope that by looking at some of the factors that contribute to creativity, I have been able to advocate on behalf of encouraging individuals to challenge ideas, to take risks, and above all to value the time that experimentation requires.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gardner, Howard. (1999), *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century*. New York, New York: Basic Books, pp. 117-118.

<sup>2</sup> Andrade, D. (n. d.), 'Sacks' Lectures on Human Creativity'. *Cornell Daily Sun*, p. 1, Retrieved 16 September 2004, from <http://journals.apa.org/prevention/volume3/pre0030001a.html>

<sup>3</sup> Haenlein, Carl. ([1997] 1997), 'Rebecca Horn in conversation with Carl Haenlein', in *The Glance of Infinity*. Zurich, Berlin, New York: Scalo. p.15.

<sup>4</sup> Marshall, Paule. (2000), *The Fisher King*. New York: Scribner, pp. 156-157.

<sup>5</sup> Gardner (1999) op. cit. p. 121.

<sup>6</sup> Harlan, J. and Kinder, K. (1999), *Crossing the line: Extending Young People's Access to Cultural Venues*. London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, pp. 102-105.

<sup>7</sup> Kocur, Z (2000). 'Museums, Artists, and Schools'. *Seiteneingange: Museumsidee & Ausstellungsweisen*, (11), 91-99.

<sup>8</sup> Harlan and Kinder, op. cit. pp. 102-105.

<sup>9</sup> Bourdieu, P. and Passeron, J.C. 1977 [1970], *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. Beverly Hills: Sage, p. 76.

<sup>10</sup> Harlan and Kinder (1999) op. cit. p. 40.

<sup>11</sup> Zolberg, V. (1986), 'An Elite Experience for Everyone: Art Museums, the Public, and Cultural Literacy', p. 56. In Rogoff, I. and Sherman, D., (eds.) (1994) *Museum Culture: The Politics of Display*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>12</sup> Kester, G. (2003), 'Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially Engaged Art'. In: Kocur, Z. and Leung, S. (eds.), (2004), *Theory in Contemporary Art: 1985 to the Present*: London: Blackwell.

<sup>13</sup> Harlan and Kinder (1999) op. cit. p. 72.

<sup>14</sup> 'Deriving again from models of schooling, education in families is sometimes regarded largely as the education of children by parents. Yet a broader conceptualization may significantly alter the areas to be investigated, the questions that are posed, and the answers that are possible. To be sure, parents educate children, but children also educate parents. Parents educate each other; siblings educate each other, grandparents educate children and parents; children educate grandparents. Moreover, such education is a lifelong process and takes place in varied groupings that change with the life cycle.' From Leichter, H. (ed.). (1975), *The Family as Educator*. New York: Teachers College Press quoted in Otaka, M. (2003), 'The Emergence of the Family as an Educational Unit in the History of Art Education', unpublished paper, Teachers College Columbia University, p.56.

<sup>15</sup> Baker, Terry L. (2002) 'Reflections on Visual Arts Education Studies', Arts

Education Partnership, Critical Links: Learning: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development, downloaded on 26 September 2004, p. 146, [www.aep-arts.org/PDF%20Files/CLvisual.pdf](http://www.aep-arts.org/PDF%20Files/CLvisual.pdf) .

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 147.

<sup>17</sup> The School for the Physical City is a New York City Alternative Public School for students from 6th to 12th grade (ages 11-18). 'Founded in 1992 to prepare, inspire and empower our children to take care of and take charge of our city, we use the city – its built environment, its communities, its history and its institutions – as a giant laboratory for education. As an Expeditionary Learning Center drawing on the experiences and ideas of Outward Bound, we begin with the idea that learning is an expedition into the unknown. Students learn to explore and learn so that they will be successful in college and as lifelong learners---and to imagine and contribute to a better world.' Mission Statement for the School for the Physical City in Manhattan, New York City Department of Education Website, Alternative High schools and Programs, downloaded on 15 October 2004, [www.nycenet.edu/OurSchools/Region9/M690/default.htm](http://www.nycenet.edu/OurSchools/Region9/M690/default.htm). The School for the Physical City is one of a handful of alternative schools designed to help students succeed who have failed in traditional schools. The school is a portfolio-based expeditionary learning school where students must pass New York State's Regent's exam in addition to completing an academic portfolio. The maths teacher, Ianthe Jackson, with whom we led the workshop, described the school as strength for students who struggle with traditional academic work, but that some kids with academically unsupportive home environments often do not receive the much-needed structure to follow through in the independent projects required of them. The school offers neither art nor music.

<sup>18</sup> Alfred Jensen (1903-1981, b. Guatemala) 'Jean Dubuffet praised the work of Alfred Jensen for its absence of taste, deeming this singular figure a kind of "primitive." ... Dubuffet's allusion to an art devoid of taste can be interpreted in a number of ways. Jensen's signature matter-of-fact mark-making, whereby the paint is applied directly from the tube, without flair or finesse, sometimes broadly with a palette knife, sometimes mechanically with a small brush, and sometimes squeezed straight on to the canvas, creating a thick impasto typically configured in flattened formats, often grids or repeating checkerboards. The clarion colors that comprise Jensen's palette are unmixed, chosen according to predetermined systems that generate both designs and chromatic harmonies... But "primitive" could also describe the idiosyncratic fusion of quotations from various ancient systems of divination and mensuration, from scientific hypotheses or from Pythagorean theories melding geometry, mathematics, and astronomy, all laminated with references to Goethe's ideas about color. Jensen's wide-ranging interest in esoteric Mayan, Egyptian, and ancient Chinese cosmologies... Far from conveying information or knowledge, his enigmatic pictograms form an armature for exercising cognitive calculus.' Cooke, L. (2001) Alfred Jensen: Concordance, Dia: Chelsea website, downloaded on 12 November 2004, <http://www.diacenter.org/exhibits/jensen/concordance/essay.html>

<sup>19</sup> [www.alfredjensen.com/writings/statement1977.html](http://www.alfredjensen.com/writings/statement1977.html)

<sup>20</sup> Cohen uses score card notation (in the series of drawings used in the Dia Center workshop) to chart two perfect games played by the New York Yankees (pitched by David Cone in 1999 and David Wells in 1998) in an

attempt to visually analyse the pitch's position within the strike zone and the hitter's response to that pitch. A perfect game in baseball occurs when a pitcher faces all 27 players and none of them are able to make a hit. There have only been 16 perfect games in the 159 years of recorded baseball history in the United States. For Cohen, the games provide a fascinating intellectual and visual exploration into strategy and luck. In this image, as the title of the work suggests, Cohen is visually charting the pitch location in the Baltimore-Minnesota game in 1995.

<sup>21</sup> Janet Cohen, email interview, May 2002.

<sup>22</sup> Carrington, Sarah and Hope, Sophie. (2003) 'In what ways does Creative Connections facilitate the idea of the artist as an agent for social change in terms of critical pedagogy', A Report on the Whitechapel Art Gallery's Artist-in-School Residency Programme, pp. 27,42. [www.whitechapel.org](http://www.whitechapel.org) Professional Development opportunities: Critical Interventions pilot course for teachers at the Institute of Education (University College London); Creative Connections, the Whitechapel Gallery's year long artist-in-residence programme that includes academic-led Inset sessions. Organisations: engage, the US-based National Art Education Association and College Art Association, The Journal of Art Education, and numerous others...

<sup>23</sup> Cartier-Bresson, Henri (1999), *The Mind's Eye: Writings on Photography and Photographs*. New York: Aperture Foundation in Swanson, Christopher P., 'Artists on Time', Chicago Humanities Festival Study Guide, (2004) p. 3, Retrieved 30 September 2004, from [www.chfestival.org/resources/content/ArtistsOnTime.pdf](http://www.chfestival.org/resources/content/ArtistsOnTime.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> Obrist, H-U and Bernac, M-L (eds.), (1998), *Louise Bourgeois Destruction of the Father Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews 1923-1997*. Cambridge: MIT Press, p. 293.

<sup>25</sup> Whitney, K. (1998), 'Richard Tuttle: No Way You Can Frame It' in *Sculpture*, Mar/1998, p.36.

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