



COURTESY NEA. CARL PURCELL

Manfred L. Keiler

Creativity: Core of Art Education

IN THE education of young people, few aspects have been given more attention in recent years than the understanding and furtherance of creativity. This newly heightened interest in one of man's most significant faculties is good, and long overdue. The primary reason for it can probably be found in the spirit

of our time. Seldom during the course of history has the need been so acute for solutions to new or apparently solved problems—be they technological, social or psychological.

The discovery of solutions to problems is essentially a creative act—a process of becoming aware of hitherto unnoticed

*Inspiration
and hard work
are wellsprings of art.*

and unexpressed relationships, or of bringing order into a conglomeration of seemingly unrelated facts. This gives rise to the question: is there any difference between creativity and inventiveness? In principle, the major difference is one of semantics. Commonly, the word "inventiveness" designates a mental activity which leads to the unfolding of new thoughts or to the origination of predominantly useful objects; "creativity" is used mostly in connection with performances of the mind which result in concepts or works without immediate utilitarian value but with pronounced aesthetic or intellectual merit. In brief, the terms "creativity" and "inventiveness" define essentially the same activity, but differ in relation to the results of this activity.

Creativity is one quality which distinctly sets man apart from all other creatures on earth—through it he is able to achieve unrealized ideals, seize hidden visions, imagine new ideas, and envision unknown aspects of reality. Creativity is an active force, an energy, and its antonyms are passivity and conformity. Creativity is not merely a synonym for the production of works with artistic merit—it has much more far-reaching implications: it is the name given to the process of emerging ideas which entails apprehending new possibilities, sensing unprecedented solutions, and conceiving unique concepts.

By accepting creativity from this broad point of view, the scope of art education immediately takes on much larger dimensions than is commonly realized. The motivation of young people combined with the means and instructions for visual creations of aesthetic merit and a personal, expressive and skillful quality, is only *one* aspect of the total aim of art education. Fundamentally its major concern is to awaken, foster, and stimulate in students that which only too often remains unchallenged in the course of an average school day: their innate creative ability.

Multiple Solutions

If one studies the offerings of our high school curricula, one finds many subject areas dealing with innumerable facts which frequently convey the idea that educated man lives in a world of absolute certainties. Actually, most youngsters are given the impression that learning equals the accumulation of indisputable truth, and that the adult world which they will soon enter is filled with the same certainties as are most of their classroom hours. Mathematical theorems, laws of physics, chemical formulas, historical data, and grammatical rules are presented to students in terms of absolutes which leave no room for doubts or uncertainties. Their days consist largely of memorizing these indisputable facts, and the only uncertainty they encounter is due either to poor memorization of these facts, or to an inability to relate them intelligently to a different or varied context. But here again, the students' teachers will tell them with certainty what is right or wrong, and

Manfred L. Keiler is Professor of Art, University of Nebraska, Lincoln.

A large part of this article was taken from the author's forthcoming book, *The Art in Teaching Art*, to be published soon by the University of Nebraska Press.

whether or not they have performed well. In this form of learning students are rarely confronted by problems which have more than a single solution.

In principle, problems which permit multiple solutions are often confusing to students, because a strong element of uncertainty is entailed. "Psychologists explain the search for certainty as the desire to return to the early days of infancy, which were not troubled by doubt and were guided by the confidence in parental wisdom."¹ The adolescent frequently transfers some of his confidence in parental wisdom to his teachers. He expects the teacher to *know*, and "to know" means, to the student, to provide him with certainties. However, this form of education does not correspond to many aspects of real life, where man is almost constantly bombarded by uncertainties. It is in this very respect that the art area simulates reality most closely.

As reality, the creative activity is also filled with uncertainties because any creative undertaking consists of many steps into the unpredictable and the precarious. Every creative thought leaves the known premise and ventures into something new, unknown and therefore uncertain. To become accustomed to living and working without certainties is as much a prerequisite to any success as knowing many precise facts. During art sessions students learn to realize that many significant areas of human endeavor are without absolutes and without certainty, and that courage, vision and the ability to pursue an aim steadfastly

are equally as important to achievement as skill, techniques and facts. Learning to work with uncertainties and not to be frightened by them is one significant contribution which the art area can provide.

Solving Problems

One other unique contribution which the creative activity can make to the education of adolescents is helping them learn to solve problems. Exercises in this form of discipline are a part of almost all academic subjects. The most obvious subjects which provide rich opportunities for problem solving are mathematics and the sciences. However, in these areas known laws and facts generally permit only a single, predetermined solution to a given problem. This is in many respects quite different from the creative area where no absolute rights and wrongs exist, and where the problem is largely self-imposed by the student and allows a variety of solutions. In addition, creative and artistic problems cannot be solved by applying clearly formulated and inflexible laws or objective facts.

The essential problem in creative expression is based on the desire to state convincingly an observation and/or emotional reaction to an experience, and to find a corresponding, clear and meaningful formulation. Finding the most adequate expression constitutes a problem for which each artist, or student, has to discover a new solution every time; he will not be able to express creatively the identical situation twice in an identical manner. Therefore, no existing former solution can ever be reapplied in exactly the same way.

Solving self-imposed problems which are an essential part of the creative process requires a large degree of self-

¹Hans Reichenbach. *The Rise of Scientific Philosophy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957. p. 36.

discipline. The value of self-discipline is so evident that no further deliberation appears necessary. However, in this context, a more detailed analysis of the relationship between the creative process and self-discipline seems justifiable.

Spontaneity

When one studies average art works by high school students, one can detect many failures which can be directly attributed either to the students' inability to attend to detail, or to their inability to carry out projects to their final and most satisfactory conclusion. After all, every genuine work of art contains two basic elements; one is plain labor, and the other is a composite of inspiration and invention.

In many instances these elements become quite obvious in significant works of art after only a brief study. Yet it is not infrequent for great masterpieces to give us the impression of having resulted from a spontaneous creative outburst. However, these "unlabored" creations are often deceptive; they are, in fact, highly skillful disguises hiding strenuous efforts, or else they are the results of years of arduous exertion. Whistler claimed that "to say of a picture, as is often said in its praise, that it shows great and earnest labor, is to say that it is incomplete and unfit for view. . . . The work of the master reeks not of the sweat of the brow—suggests no effort—and is finished from its beginning."²

It is not rare to find untutored spontaneity in the drawings of small children, and we rightly admire them for it. But a marked difference exists between the work of elementary school

children and that of high school students. It is characteristic that adolescents, with their self-critical attitude, lose this desirable effortlessness. The high school student, like any artist, must therefore labor to the limit of his ability and must then attempt to go beyond this point.

The importance of self-discipline and hard work in relation to creative efforts is often insufficiently well understood. "We of today have little realization of the amount of labor expended on the long road from apprenticeship to mastery, whereon the world's artists have all had to travel in the past. The popular notion of genius, surviving probably from the Romantic movement, as an effortless and God-given illumination, descending like the Pentecostal dove on the chosen few, has corrupted our understanding of the artist's real nature and encouraged all manner of outrage, ranging from laziness to sheer impudence, in the self-chosen apostle of today, who has indeed a gift of tongue, but no other manifestation of divinity. Until recently, art has been very hard work. It is still so for those who preserve any continuity with the Great Tradition."³

It is mainly self-discipline which enables the artist to travel the difficult and laborious road leading from the creative impulse and the spontaneous sketch to the finished work. Considerable self-discipline is needed to be swayed neither by a lack of immediate success, nor by disappointment due to a feeling of inadequacy. In fact, one of the most important prerequisites for any creative success is the ability to pursue an aim steadfastly, regardless of whether or not rapid results are attained. This ability

² James McNeil Whistler. *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1923. p. 115.

³ Rhys Carpenter. *The Bases of Artistic Creation*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1942. p. 35.

is effective in most working situations and is definitely not restricted solely to the art area.

Some peripheral conditions and elements of creativity are known. We know that self-discipline and concentrated effort as well as imagination and experience are particulars which are constituents of creativity. Yet creativity as such, in spite of many attempts at investigating its basic components, is still as much a mystery as life itself. Carl Jung wrote: "The creative aspect of life which finds

its clearest expression in art baffles all attempts at rational formulation. Any reaction to stimulus may be causally explained; but the creative act, which is the absolute antithesis of mere reaction, will forever elude the human understanding. It can only be described in its manifestations; it can be obscurely sensed, but never wholly grasped."⁴

⁴ Carl Gustav Jung. "Psychology and Literature." *The Creative Process*. Brewster Ghiselin, Editor. Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1952. p. 209.

Creative Dramatics

(Continued from page 23)

dramatics, one might hear in response to the question, "Why was it fun?" such comments as these:

"Because I got to be President." (A fourth grade boy who, as General Washington, inspected the flag.)

"Because you can do the best you know how to do and nobody grumbles." (An eighth grade boy who had just appeared in the front of the room for the first time in six months.)

"Because I have a whole bucketful of new words." (A fifth grade girl who enjoyed contributing "picture words" for descriptions of characters in Rachel Field's poem, "Roads.")

"Because when you use your imagination, everything comes out all right." (A fifth grade boy who had become a pilot making a daring rescue on Mt. McKinley.)

"Because you seem to understand our needs." (A shy fifth grade girl who felt awe in sighting the tower in "Why the Chimes Rang.")

"Because you can be mean and not hurt anybody." (A fourth grade boy who enjoyed playing the role of the giant in "Jack and the Beanstalk," but realized

that the giant does not gain the respect of the players.)

"I've learned enough to last me for three days." (An eighteen year old student about to receive a certificate of attendance from a special school for slow learners.)

Through the art of creative dramatics, dreams and ambitions, attitudes and values, inner controls, aesthetic appreciation, sensitivity of spirit and a song in one's heart daily fill the learner's storehouse. Through identification with quality human experiences which help build rather than destroy, courage and confidence to go beyond that which is expected, wisdom and ability to respond effectively to change, develop on a high level through a dramatic process of thinking, feeling, experiencing, a process which affords the learner opportunity to achieve full self-realization in the world of tomorrow.

References

LILLIAN LOGAN. *Teaching the Young Child*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960.

HUGHES MEARNS. *Creative Power*. New York: Dover Publications, 1958.

MARGARET S. WOODS. *Creative Dramatics*. Washington, D. C.: NEA Elementary Instructional Service, March 1959.

LAURA ZIRBES. *Spurs to Creative Teaching*. New York: George Putnam's Sons, 1958.

Copyright © 1960 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.