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Enhancing Creativity in a Graduate Class on Creativity: Entering the Time and Space of the Young Child

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In designing a graduate class at the University of Massachusetts, called “Creativity and the Young Child,” we built an experience for adults based on a highly regarded European preschool program based on the visual arts. The program, found in the municipal schools for three to six year olds in the City of Reggio Emilia, Italy, is designed to foster young children’s learning, representation, and expression through exploration and mastery of many symbolic media. We wanted to find out whether American adults exposed to the theoretical and practical elements of the Reggio Emilia approach - but on an adult level - would enjoy some of the same results the children seem to enjoy. There were three major phases to our course: 1) learning about the Reggio Emilia curriculum and pedagogy (the “Symbolic Languages Approach”); 2) experiencing aspects of the approach; and 3) designing and implementing student projects with children.

Reggio Emilia is a city of 130,000 people in the prosperous and progressive Emilia Romagna Region of northern Italy. Its early childhood system is considered one of the premier programs in Europe; it originated after World War II in preschools started by parents. The city now runs 20 schools for children aged three to six years, as well as 12 toddler/infant centers for children under three (Gandini & Edwards, 1988). Visual expression through many media is the keystone of the curriculum. The results of the children’s work, composed into striking displays by the teachers, literally surround the children in every part of the school. Children’s work is not casually created, but rather is the result of a guided exploration of themes and events that are relevant to the life of the children and the larger community (Gandini, 1984).

We conducted the first two sessions of our course using slides of the Italian children and their teachers engaged in a variety of activities depicting the scope of the Reggio Emilia program. American visits to the program have concurred in concluding that it seems to lead young children to unexpected levels of artistic skill and symbolic representation. Teachers’ ultimate goal, as the program’s Catalog states, is “to produce a reintegrated child who is capable of constructing his or her own powers of thinking and selecting, through the reanimation and integration of all the expressive, communicative and cognitive languages” (1987, p. 1 1).

Creativity is defined as “knowledge and the wonder of knowledge” and “humanity’s most important right.” Art is not viewed as a separate part of the curriculum but rather as part of the whole cognitive/symbolic learning of the developing child. Italy, of course, is a country where citizens are proud of their culture, and every child grows up surrounded by centuries old masterpieces of art and architecture; thus art becomes a natural vehicle in educational approaches for helping children explore and develop their potential.

The Symbolic Languages Approach involves doing - reflecting - redoing. It is different from an emergent curriculum that simply marches forward from one activity or exploration to the next. Rather, it looks for depth through observation and re-observation, representation and re-representation. An illustration of this cycling process can be taken from the exhibition prepared in Reggio Emilia to explain their work, called “The 100 Languages of Children,” now on tour in the United States. A section of the exhibit portrays a group of children who were asked to draw poppies with felt-tip pens. Afterwards they were taken to a brilliant field of red poppies and invited to explore the flowers however they liked. They peered at the poppies, smelled them, danced in them, threw them in the air, adorned their hair and clothing. When they returned to their classroom, they talked together about their experience and then drew the poppies again. The results were striking. The children’s second representations seem to demonstrate skills and comprehension beyond their age level, as if they have matured a year or so from the time of their first drawings. In describing this approach to teaching, one of the Reggio educational directors states:

A thorough visual education not only frees the child from passive and dependent perception (very common among the television viewing children of today), but also helps children to develop a dynamic and productive way of thinking that is both rational and imaginative. (Gandini& Edwards, 1988)

The Reggio teachers thus consider the educational process to involve both creative exploration and problem-solving. The initial art activity evokes other pursuits that can take on numerous intellectual, even scientific dimensions leading to greater understanding (Forman, 1989).

At the next meeting of our course we began the second and experiential phase of the course, following techniques outlined by Doris Shallcross (1981). We met on an autumn afternoon at a conservation area in Amherst, with woods, brook, and open fields. The students divided themselves into three theme groups: rocks, water, and plant life. They spent an hour-and-a-half exploring nature in terms of their themes. We then returned to the classroom, our “studio,” where a plethora of art materials had been set out. The students then set about to represent symbolically their observations and experiences in the park. Many had brought back stones, seeds, leaves and other natural items from the outdoors, and they incorporated them into their artwork. Only the water group chose to work collectively, and the others worked individually.

During both the outdoor explorations in the woods and the subsequent art-making in the studio, we photographed the students - thereby recording the very processes of experiencing and doing. By the next class meeting, the photos had been mounted and displayed in the classroom, and slides that had been taken were shown. This was a part of the documentation process, which served to enhance and stimulate our collective memory as well as to validate

an emotional level the thoughts, feelings, and experiences the students had had. Later, comments and dialogue by the students (audio-taped during the studio session) were added in captions next to the photographs, providing further food for reflection.

The next class meeting was structured in the same way. The students first went to the Conservation area where they reexamined the plants, minerals, and water in the natural setting. Students seemed especially engrossed by the incremental seasonal changes in plant life that had occurred over the week and differences due to the change in weather from wet to dry. Then all returned to the studio to again render their perceptions and feelings into Personal art.

The third and final phase of the class involved designing a Project for children based on one or more features of the Reggio approach and carrying it out. Even those among the graduate students who are experienced teachers of young children felt that because they had such as personal experience in the course, they were able to approach their project with greater depth, appreciation, and comprehension of the teaching-learning process. They were able to integrate cognitive and aesthetic goals and better tune into the childrens' thought processes. They also saw new possibilities for using process documentation.

At the last class meeting all came together to describe their projects with children and consider what they had learned from our course experiences' It became clear that the following four aspects of the course methodology had indeed been most provocative in reshaping the students' techniques for promoting creativity in children.

The Importance of Documentation

Following the practice in Reggio Emilia, we had used much more process documentation than usual in teaching adults - even in an experiential course. We found it to be strikingly beneficial in enhancing students' courage and pleasure in their learning' When, during the third and fourth meetings, students came into the studio and saw the slides and photographic posters," or recording the previous weeks, they claimed to experience a strong sense of validation. The pictures of themselves made a statement about the value and importance of what they had done, said, and thought. At the same time, the photos were intellectually stimulating; by seeing themselves through our (the photographers') eyes' they saw themselves in a new way. Here is how one student, Ron Baer, put it in his end of term paper:

When we went to Amethyst Brook, I enjoyed myself. The opportunity to express myself creatively in relation to my experiences was exciting. Working with the group was stimulating. However, it was when I saw the slides and pictures of our trip at the next class that a whole new level of understanding and appreciation for the experiences began to unfold for me. There I was in the pictures - just doing what I had done. I was excited to see them. Now the experience had a new richness for me. The photographs shouted out, "You did this! You were here!" What had been ordinary was now for me extraordinary. I realized how important the documenting of the experience was for me'

Ron was there by provoked to think about how all of the moments of his life usually " slip

away, like a blur." This became the springboard to a new way of thinking about his own five year old son, Ian, who has Downs Syndrome. He went out and purchased a camera, then began a project of documenting for Ian the ordinary moments of life: bathing, dressing, going to preschool, and the regular places he goes in his day. At night, father and son look at the pictures together; they have put them in a book and made posters - all to give Ian an enhanced memory before it "forever vanishes in the blur of the quest for life." Ron reports that with the aid of the photos, Ian becomes much better able to organize himself; for example, when Ron lays out photos in sequence to show Ian the schedule of his forthcoming day, then Ian is much more cooperative and enthusiastic. For Ron himself, photographing the process of ordinary days has been "a very healing thing."

And yet the process of documenting did more than validate the students; like an artist's journal, the photographs provided a boost to memory and allowed the students to revisit the original experience (with its attendant thoughts and feelings) and then reconstruct and interpret it in a deeper way. For example, another of our students, Naomi Gunner, returned the second week and noticed a photograph of the collage she had made the week before. She told us that she had not been happy with her collage the week before, but now, seeing it in the photograph, she felt that both it and she were important and beautiful. She went to look again at her original collage and noticed that the milkweed pod, previously closed, had in the past week burst open. This made her feel that her original intuition to include the milkweed pod was thereby affirmed. She realized that the symbolic significance for her of this milkweed pod was its transformation — from flat to bursting — which mirrored an internal process. Thus, the process of documentation, so simple for us to perform, had educational benefits far beyond the effort that we had expended.

The Benefits of a Cycling Curriculum: Getting Ahead by Going Back

Too often in America, we teach in the same way that we run our lives, always in a hurry, rushing from one thing to the next at breakneck speed, so as not to miss anything important. In our course, however, taking a hint from the Italian program, we tried to slow down and enter child time and use our moments together in a different way, cycling through alternating experiences of observing and representing the natural environment. We were worried that students might find this slow and boring, but instead they found the process conducive to creativity. For example, several people noticed that the second time we went into the conservation area, they were more relaxed - not so focused on the "assignment" to explore or on the expectation of producing an artistic project. This enabled them to notice either more details than they had seen the week before, or to feel more of the totality beyond the specifics. Yu Yen Chang, from Taiwan, had spent the first time in the woods noticing how divergent the plants of New England were from those at home. The second week she said she noticed something deeper: the basic universal structures in nature. She represented this truth by constructing a beautiful artwork containing a milkweed seed against a background of shiny black and gold paper.

Many students, in their projects with children, made use of their increased appreciation for this kind of "recycling" observation and representation. For instance, Louise Loomis developed

a long term project with a class of Hartford inner-city youngsters on the theme of The Face. In an initial session the children focused on traits and qualities of people; they brainstormed a huge list of qualities, then drew faces which they labeled with names and qualities. The next session the students received back both their original drawings and photocopies of them that they could now rework and elaborate. This was such a success that in another session the faces were returned - now reduced in size on the photocopier - so that the children could draw bodies and then make clothing out of wallpaper samples. And on it went. We all learned that the teaching process should probably involve a lot more going back around than is customary; so that one can revise what one thought or understood before in the light of re-examination and re-observation, and see and develop more possibilities and make more out of them.

The Value of Group Sharing

Group sharing and communication was an integral part of the process of discovery and re-discovery. The educators in Reggio Emilia have said:

The child's potential does not develop in isolation, but rather in interaction with objects, events, and other people. It is a continuous transaction with the surrounding world. Images are used to construct other images - passing through sensations, feelings, interactions, problems, and exchanges of ideas. The child needs active co-participation by peers and other adults. (Gandini & Edwards, 1988)

Following this lead, we structured more collective exploration, reflection, and artmaking than we had in the past in our courses. For example, the students explored the conservation area in theme groups. Through seeing what others were noticing, picking up on one another's emotions and ideas, and studying one another's responses as documented in the photographs, individuals' range of experience was expanded. As Taiwanese student Shan Lee Liu (a person very new to experiential education) stated, "It was important to get in and out of myself."

We noticed that each of the three themes groups took on a different "personality" that seemed to mirror the nature of what they were studying. The group focused on the minerals meandered rather cerebrally through intellectual discussions of geologic history, their personal prehistories, and the nature of aesthetic appreciation. The plant group, like natural scientists, explored singly or in pairs. They collected many specimens about which they constructed rich symbolic meaning. Later in sharing their experiences with others in the class, they talked about self and nature, feelings and form, mind and spirit, observation and empathy - contrasts arising from their rather solitary and meditative experiences. In contrast, the water group roved about like a joyful little gang, exploring the streams and puddles with playfulness, laughter, and spontaneity; they followed one another into the rushing water, examined dew dropped spiderwebs in the branches above, and responded together to the beauty of light dancing on the surface of the water. One person used heavy vines to swing across the stream, with the others cheering him on.

The students used their experiences in collaborative education in designing their projects

with children. For example, Joan Friebely conducted a project with a kindergarten class in a public school on the theme of shadows. In her final papers, she emphasized the value of collaboration between children: While the shadows were always the declared foreground of our attention, we consistently worked in pairs, pairs of pairs, and as a whole group. This modeled collaboration in pursuit of shared goals while showing the kinds of satisfactions available in such a process.

Another student, Mel Donahue, demonstrated the centrality of the co-participation of the adult in children's creative work. She spent two days with her two nieces. On the first day, she created the opportunity for a group trip in which there was much communication between herself and the girls. Later that day she provided an array of art materials and actively encouraged the girls to represent their experience, staying with them to provide them continual support and feedback. The girls worked for a long time and created elaborate, intense works. The next day, the girls came along on an adult-oriented trip and were left largely to their own devices. Returning, the girls eagerly asked to use the art materials again, but without adult interest and support, created drab, impoverished pieces which they quickly abandoned.

The Centrality of Art in Education

Like the teachers in Reggio Emilia, we considered the artistic process not as a peripheral part of education but rather at its center and inseparable from intellectual discovery. The making of art created the emotional opportunity for putting together all that the students were learning in the course. Through representing their experiences in nature (and with each other), students were given the impetus to enter the labyrinth of artistic creation. Everyone was tremendously absorbed and most did not want to finish but instead to go deeper and deeper. Some beautiful pieces of artwork emerged.

The water theme group worked collaboratively to represent their experience of the fluidity and mystery of water by making plaster masks of each others' faces and forming them into a sculpture intent to convey the motion and flux of the river and themselves. Louise Loomis of the rock theme group described the process of art-making as liberation which grows from a sense of deep inner pleasure. She became absorbed in playing with her rock specimens and began thinking about how the forces of time break apart and change rocks; this led her to muse on her own evolution. Breaking the rocks against one another, she made a palette of rock powders as she had done as a child on the beach and worked them into a chalk pastel representing the "moods" of the rocks in the conservation area.

Similarly, in their projects with young children, the students found that the children did not want to stop either. Whether discovering a nest of ladybugs and pursuing this interest into various drawing project, stories, and further first-hand observations; or exploring the night sky through both structured observations and successive attempts to represent; it was found that children dove in with interest, extended their explorations and questioning, and self-directedly continued to explore what had been initiated by the adult. The students found that they could easily set the stage for ever-expanding observations, inquiries, and productions by children that were exciting, playful, and pleasurable to both sides.

Conclusions

"Creativity and the Young Child" became a graduate class that achieved its goals far beyond our expectations. As instructors, we were reminded of the value of personal, experiential learning, regardless of the student's age level. We experimented successfully with four techniques of teaching: documenting and thereby amplifying the acts of exploring nature, interacting with others, and representing and exploring through the making of art; taking time to repeat and therefore delve deeper into an original experience; increasing collaboration and collective work within the learning group; and integrating the artistic process into our "cognitive" goals for the course. These techniques, borrowed from the pedagogy of Reggio Emilia, Italy, seemed to work powerfully to give adults specific new knowledge and skills for understanding and increasing the creativity of young children.

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