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Jesters Freed from their Jack-in-the-Boxes: Or Springing Creativity Loose from Traditionally Entrenched Honors Students

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Many people in our society manage adequately all their lives without ever flexing a creative muscle. Yet, most of us involved in Honors education expect and want more for our students. We know that those who resist using creativity in their lives and work will be unlikely to push beyond the traditional boundaries of scholastic analysis. Further, we reason that, by operating beyond such boundaries, our students may someday find a cure for cancer, recognize signs marking sentient life on other planets, or move people to leave hatred of differences behind. We realize that such dreams are possible only if we agree that “the purpose of education should be understanding rather than simply knowing; its focus should be on the active process of learning and creating rather than the passive acquisition of facts” (Root-Bernstein 316). Like most Honors educators, I am concerned with how best to involve my students in the rich possibilities available to those who can successfully engage both critical and creative modes of thought. As a former undergraduate poetry major who turned to the highly traditional field of medieval studies in graduate school, I am constantly aware of the

² Arthur J. Cropley, “Creativity and Cognition: Producing Effective Novelty,” *Roeper Review* 21.4 (May/June 1999), p. 253. Another helpful work by Cropley is *More Ways than One: Fostering Creativity* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing, 1992).

³ Among those studies most useful for the purposes of this article are George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980); George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophies of the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); and George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987).

⁴ In addition to sources cited elsewhere in this article, the following works provide helpful background and information on the contemporary study of creativity: Denis Dutton and Michael Krausz, eds., *The Concept of Creativity in Science and Art*, American University Publications in Philosophy III (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981); and David G. Tuerck, ed., *Creativity and Liberal Learning: Problems and Possibilities in American Education* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing, 1987).

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extent to which creative expression has served me as both a springboard and a sanctuary for fresh or prolonged reflection on my own research and teaching. Such a background taught me the personal and professional value of integrating critical and creative faculties into my own work. However, my current teaching experience in an interdisciplinary Honors program has taught me that many academic environments so strongly encourage students to compartmentalize and prioritize their learning that the educational advantages of artistic creation are frequently ignored or even lost. To avoid such a fate in my own humanities-based courses, I combine standard critical thinking assignments (such as research papers, analytical essays, and reading-response assignments) with creative arts exercises (such as poems, illustrations for difficult textual passages, and historical fiction projects) to give my students experience using both faculties.

While institutions of higher education typically offer degrees and courses in subjects such as fine arts, theatre arts, creative writing, and media arts that automatically appeal to students already interested in creative expression, these programs are generally perceived by those outside such departments as adjunct to the “real subjects” of higher education. Subscribing to such views, the majority of university students avoid these classes and enter disciplines featuring perspectives attractive to critical, but not necessarily creative, thinkers. Taking their cues from discipline-specialized teachers as well as previous educational experiences, these students commonly learn to choose analytical procedure and research to the exclusion of artistic experimentation.¹

Similarly, because Honors programs are philosophically and institutionally committed to seeking the highest level of academic achievement, we ordinarily focus our curriculum on students who display the traits of academic excellence, or the potential for such excellence, preferred by university cultures. Reflecting the aims of most Honors educators, Martha Rosenthal succinctly explains her program’s focus on “student-centered learning, critical thinking, community involvement, learning outside the classroom, an interdisciplinary approach, and a commitment to academic excellence” (15). I, too, want my students to learn those concepts and have no wish to argue that Honors education should seek otherwise. More central to the point I wish to make, however, is Rosenthal’s subsequent remark that her program hopes its

⁵ The scientists among us can explain the theories suggesting that the right side of the human brain produces creative, artistic expression through divergent thinking, while the left side primarily controls logical, analytical operations by means of convergent thinking. Such theories posit that where the left side of our brains is involved with data, the right side provides the creative capacity to synthesize that data into original ideas and perceptions. While the distinctions between right- and left-brain activities are probably more familiar than they are biologically accurate, given the complexities of deciphering how the two parts of the brain actually communicate with each other, I find the language of such theories offers a useful means of distinguishing between creative and strictly analytical faculties. A useful summary of theories regarding the dual nature of the human brain for non-specialists may be found in Betty Edwards, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain: A Course in Enhancing Creativity and Artistic Confidence* (Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1979), pp. 25-44.

students “will continue their intellectual and creative development throughout their lives” (15). To foster the development Rosenthal articulates here, I ask my students to develop artistic expression as a means to expand the analytical functions emphasized in most college courses.

Unfortunately, although a few of the most dynamic and successful students in my program are both strong analytical thinkers and creative artists highly engaged in their media, the majority of students in my classes (and I suspect also in other Honors classes throughout the country) are more comfortable with factual examinations and critical interpretations of data than with the creative expression of their thoughts. Sadly, these same students are frequently those “who are best equipped to be academically and intellectually adventurous [but who] are sometimes the least apt to do so” (Harte 26). John Zubizarretta comments on such students when he asks:

[H]as anyone else had the experience of sitting through graduation and noticing that some of the students who earn academic honors are not necessarily the same students whom we would have identified as the students willing to take intellectual and personal risks, willing to take on unique or additional challenges, willing to think critically and learn liberally? They have earned the grade perhaps by doing what they’ve been told, figuring out the system, staying squeaky clean in work habits, but they lack luster and tolerance for the wildness of learning (as opposed to being efficient with knowledge), lack eccentric imagination. (26)

I recognize these same lackluster students in my own program. Their intolerance for “the wildness of learning” arises from an unfamiliarity with and disrespect for the creative process. These are the students who avoid courses in creative arts subjects. They were never taught that creativity is the product of scientists as well as artists. As the French physician Armand Trousseau describes, “all science touches on art; . . . The worst scientist is he who is not an artist” (qtd. in Root-Bernstein 21). Their “lack of eccentric imagination” results from poor access to the creative imagination that may benefit their long-range professional goals.

Although the degree to which the development of creativity affects an individual’s future achievements is debated in academic circles, researchers generally agree that the ability to function creatively provides a crucial intellectual advantage. Arthur J. Cropley, an influential scholar on the subject of creativity, presents compelling psychological evidence that intellectual giftedness may be linked specifically to creative cognition, which produces what he calls “effective novelty.”² Studies by Lakoff and Johnson further support a provocative philosophical framework that describes thought as something embodied explicitly in the biological functions of the brain.³ For them, reason is grounded in the actuality of physical experience and “is not purely literal, but largely metaphorical and imaginative” (Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophies* 4). In addition, Robert and Michèle Root-Bernstein pinpoint the importance of creative reasoning to future advances when they write that “Learning to think creatively in one discipline therefore opens the door to understanding creative thinking in all disciplines. Educating this universal creative imagination is the key to producing lifelong learners capable of shaping the

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innovations of tomorrow” (vii). Other works produced in the last twenty years from diverse disciplinary perspectives that examine the cognitive roots and social manifestations of creativity assert that its increased use in education has vastly greater consequences for improving the human condition than was previously understood.⁴

Most of us in Honors education yearn to teach the next Albert Einstein or Jonas Salk. But I submit that education which encourages students to employ only their critical faculties will be unlikely to fulfill such hopes. As my UNM colleague Ruth Meredith explains, “Contemporary Western culture has tended to privilege logical thought over imaginative thought because it fails to recognize the close relationship between them. Without imagination, logic becomes trapped in what is already known and cannot make the creative leaps necessary for understanding how we create the realities we inhabit” (Chapter on “Philosophical Reflections,” ii). About the creative thinking that motivated his own revolutionary work in the traditional field of physics, Einstein is quoted as saying that “imagination is more important than knowledge” (Root-Bernstein 23). We as teachers in higher education know that analytical and artistic faculties are neither mutually exclusive nor necessarily separate forms of thinking. Even so, our academic world still values most highly the analytical or left-brain pursuits.⁵ Because of this investment in the critical capabilities of our students, we sometimes neglect the creative processes which may be taught best through artistic expression. By such neglect, I would argue that we help to produce the students so many of us bemoan—students who develop only competence, rather than the true excellence that Jack Dudley, in “A Place for Honors,” insists be the goal of Honors programs.

What can we do, then, to develop that creative thinking which augments analytical thinking in our Honors students, especially those most reluctant to explore their own creative potential? If we acknowledge that “creative thinking in every field begins in nonlogical, nonverbal forms” (Root-Bernstein 317), how can we fortify the imaginative qualities that give rise to such forms? Given the narrow limitations of degree programs and the overstuffed nature of most Honors programs, we cannot in good conscience compel each student to take enough creative arts courses to become truly proficient at wielding some artistic skill or another. Instead I propose that, to encourage students to think creatively, we expose them to basic skills in creative writing and/or visual imagery. Further, I suggest that they learn such skills in courses not only on the creative arts, but also on traditional subjects. By assigning activities designed to engage the human brain’s creative faculties not in lieu of but in concert with the brain’s critical ones, Honors teachers can enhance our students’ potential for professional excellence and innovation.

While I am certain that Honors teachers want students to benefit from joining analysis to creative problem-solving, I suspect that we most often encourage such intellectual unions simply by *telling* our students to think “outside the box” or “beyond the box,” rather than asking them to express their knowledge and understanding through artistic forms. Yet, the pedagogical difficulty with telling students to think outside or beyond the box is that such an approach is defined by the limitations of analytical thinking and imposes a similarly confined structure (the box)

as a beginning point. My own first experiments in trying to get my students to think creatively ended up largely as engaging diversions from “the hard stuff” or “the real work” of my course content. I realized only later that my vague dissatisfaction with such forays resulted from the fact that they resembled nothing so much as a Jack-in-the-box toy, from which something colorful and fun pops out in a big surprise of noise and action, but which nevertheless remains completely attached to the physical structure of the box and is relegated, ultimately, to being stuffed back into hiding within the box. I had been *thinking* about how and what it meant to work outside traditional structures, when what I needed was to *imagine* the source of my failure to achieve this end in the metaphor of the child’s toy. Most of my students had no clue how to go about thinking outside the box; instead, they needed to *be* actually outside the academic box. Armed with this insight, I stopped talking to my students about creative thinking in research and started requiring them to create poems, stories, drawings, and collages along with their more traditional assignments.

Despite a cultural misconception that creativity “just happens” or “is inspired,” many artists and some recent scholars argue that creative expression is not innate and can be taught. A 1996 study by Eisenberger and Cameron, for example, strongly suggests that creativity can be developed at least in elementary school children. As all creative artists know, brilliant efforts in any art form come from hard work and extensive training in the successful use of gifts acquired through inspiration. Similarly, seven years of teaching college composition (English 101 type courses) earlier in my career proved to me that the most effective way to teach students to write analytical essays is not to tell them how to do so, but to give them lots of practice developing their thoughts in writing. Still, students unfamiliar with how to work creatively can rarely tap their imaginative faculties until they are trained to do so. To use another analogy, basic math may seem self-apparent to most adults, but we all need practice in it before becoming adept at its use. Few of us would have enough natural inspiration to know how to balance our checkbooks without first having had extensive math drills in grade school. Knowing how to use creative approaches to problems, academic or otherwise, requires similar practice in aesthetic endeavors such as putting words together harmoniously in a line of poetry or foregrounding the main subject in a collage of various images. Yet, how many of us had as much elementary school training in writing poetry or constructing art projects as we had in math or even spelling?

Explaining the necessity of training in artistic processes in order to expand creativity, Betty Edwards claims that “one becomes more creative *not* by trying to be more creative, but rather by further developing that part of the mind, the visual, perceptual mode of the brain, which is so deeply involved in creative thinking” and later that “any increase in perceptual skills will have a positive effect on creative endeavors” (230). In addition to improving my students’ critical thinking processes, my pedagogical aim is to help them activate those impulses of spontaneity, imagination, and artistic discovery that serve as the basic tools of any creative trade and all creative thought. To accomplish this goal, I insist that my students not only construct assignments from analytical perspectives, but also that they perform exercises, such as writing fictional narratives about or drawing stick figures of

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abstract concepts, to practice artistic expression. Mary Jane Petrowski alludes to the significance of such practice in creativity when she writes, “Creative breakthroughs are possible only after prolonged preparation” (310). My own teaching experience, grounded as it is in my personal background, leads me to believe that the practice of some kind of artistry is the best stimulus for getting students to be more creative, whether in the service of the next great American novel, a radical philosophical treatise on humanity’s place in the universe, or a scientific discovery that leads to cost-efficient production of clean fuel free for all the world’s populations. Yes, I dream big; that’s a legacy of my origins as a poet. But only if my students learn the creative skills that empower them to dream so hugely will they be able to enact such visions for themselves.

As a teacher, I struggle constantly with how much or how little to include in my syllabi in order to provide the most effective learning experience for my students. When I first timidly began using creative exercises in classes on classical studies or medieval culture, I was concerned both that my tenuous curricular balance would tumble and that my students already predisposed against working creatively would be resistant to my entire course because of such activities. Also, since I was unwilling to sacrifice analysis and research, I had to explore ways to merge creativity with my existing curriculum. After several attempts with mostly Jack-in-the-box types of exercises, I learned that combining critical skills together with artistic methods enabled me to keep my students both creatively and intellectually engaged without seriously compromising academic content or challenging students beyond their capacities. In my classes, activities calling for the use of creative skills are always linked to a discussion in which students analyze the results in light of the original works or to a formal essay evaluating the academic sources and materials used to accomplish the assignment. Juxtaposing these creative and critical efforts allows me to avoid mere Jack-in-the-box diversions that detract from my pedagogical goals. Instead, I seek opportunities for assignments that yield possibilities for novel intellectual dimensions in which the critical and creative intertwine. Although not all the creative approaches I try with my students are successful, my purpose in assigning such activities is to elicit new avenues for academic exchange in courses structured around traditional content. While the purpose of this article is not to highlight my own teaching strategies, but rather to suggest ways critical thinking may be supported and expanded by creative work in courses on traditional subjects, listing some of my most successful assignments may assist others seeking to develop their own approaches. These assignments include asking that students

- Use research to construct a journal or group of letters written from the point of view of a fictional character from an actual historical time period;
- Compose poems in ancient or medieval forms, such as Dantean tercets, Homeric stanzas, or Sapphic lyrics;
- Copy the handwriting or illuminations from manuscript pages using modern tools;
- Summarize abstract concepts from a text in the narrative form of a comic book or in a collage of images cut from magazines;

- Illustrate in a drawing a particularly difficult passage from Aquinas, Plato, or Aristotle;
- Illuminate or gloss photocopies of text pages from a medieval manuscript;
- Draw Celtic interlace patterns;
- Write inscriptions in Ogham or Norse runes for the monument of a fictional person.

For teachers already committed to student-centered pedagogies, incorporating such creative arts activities requires little extra work, training, or equipment. In fact, most of these activities are accomplished with only one or two simple tools such as pens or pencils, paper, crayons or color markers, and maybe some cellophane tape and scissors. After much experimentation during the last several years, I now generally incorporate six to eight short in-class creative exercises and one longer assignment in a creative form into most of my classes on traditional humanities-based subjects. While this pattern works well with my pedagogical goals for classes that meet twice a week for seventy-five minutes over a sixteen-week semester, other faculty prefer to have students work creatively for ten to fifteen minutes of every class.

While I have learned to balance the creative and critical components of my curriculum, persuading students that creative assignments can benefit their learning process is still not easy. The resistance so many of our students have to artistic expression signals their intense anxiety about their own creativity as well as the perceived lack of academic advantage endemic to creative efforts. Not only are courses in creative subjects usually considered ancillary features of higher education, but the majority of our students also have an acute fear of expressing their ideas in creative forms. Describing a similar discomfort, Katy Rose Resnick's Clarke College students write, "Imagine being told, after twelve years of schooling, to throw away the thought process to which you'd become accustomed and to start thinking in a different manner. (You'd be frightened, believe me!)" (Abben, et al 3). Since only a minority of our students possesses educational experience with artistic, right-brain actions, most students fear failure in their attempts to use creative tools and methods. By rejecting artistic expression of their ideas, these students dismiss the possible benefits afforded by a combination of right- and left-brain thinking. The rejection of such benefits is apparent when, after I have assigned a creative project, students frequently beg me to let them work on a research project instead. They respond to my creativity assignments with statements such as "I don't have a creative bone in my body," "I can't do art," "I don't understand poetry," or "I wouldn't even know where to start." Even after reassurances that anyone can construct whatever creative project I have assigned, these students most often go away looking tense and anxious. Their reactions betray the very real discomfort Honors students experience when asked to produce work outside normal analytical methods.

However, I find that my students' fear of working creatively regularly

⁶ For those interested in general studies of the jester figure, see Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1935); and William Willeford, *The Fool and His Scepter* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press,

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diminishes as they become more confident in its practice. The same students who initially pleaded to do research projects instead of creative assignments consistently return no longer tense and anxious, but instead exhilarated and surprised by what they have accomplished. After completing creative projects, even the most reluctant students often make such comments as “I can’t believe this came out so good,” “I never knew I could think this way,” “This was a lot more fun than I thought it would be,” or “I got so involved in this that I spent more time on it than I would on a research paper and I think I learned more, too.” In addition, they often acquire more self-awareness and security in expressing their ideas across my curriculum. Although from a different educational environment, Nancy Mildrum’s explorations in creativity with elementary school children reflect my own findings with college Honors students in her statement that, “When children have experience with expansive attitudes related to creativity, they begin to feel more confident about who they are and what they have to contribute” (37). Once my students learn to work creatively even on a small scale, they begin to be less afraid of using creativity in other ways. When accompanied by solid training in analysis, creative expression in all types of classes allows my students to learn that critical and creative modes of thinking are most effective when they are integrated with each other. For instance, students whom I ask to compose a series of three Dantean tercets with an interlocking rhyme scheme about a political figure of our own time tend to understand more directly and at a deeper level the political implications of Dante’s work than those who study thirteenth-century Florentine politics only from a scholastic perspective. This improved understanding comes about because the artistic act of writing poetry demands that students bring their own subjective experiences to bear on the course content. When students read about thirteenth-century Florentine politics from academic sources, they have been trained to respond objectively to the interpretation of historical facts. But such objectivity cannot even hint at what it might have been like actually to live that same history. However, when asked to write a series of tercets describing the Hell a contemporary figure from our own time might deserve, students participate in their own concerns for an audience’s reaction to their work. By relating their own subjective experience with such assignments to Dante’s much larger effort, students begin to comprehend better the seriousness of the personal and political risks Dante faced when writing his *Divine Comedy*.

While traditional study and discussion of authors such as Homer, Dante, or Darwin allows Honors students to acquire academic knowledge and associated critical discourses, creative exercises linked to such knowledge invite students to own and value the uniqueness of their individual perceptions about academic

⁷ Although this nursery rhyme has many variations, one of its more common texts reads as follows:

For want of a nail, a shoe was lost.
For want of a shoe, a horse was lost.
For want of a horse, a rider was lost.
For want of a rider, a foray was lost.
For want of a foray, a battle was lost.
For want of a battle, the war was lost.

material. As a medievalist and the coordinator of our program's 100-level Legacy courses in the foundations and development of western culture, I have a particular investment in encouraging my students to develop personal relationships with early sources and texts. Our Legacy faculty often debate ways to make students better aware of the relevance of seemingly archaic or culturally distanced course material to their lives in the early twenty-first century. Incorporating creative exercises and assignments into such courses as the Legacy series strengthens students' connections to the intellectual and cultural relevance of early materials while causing them to exercise the creative muscles they are so reluctant to use. Although I have only subjective insights from my fifteen years of college-level teaching rather than objective data from long-term experiments and surveys, my sense is that, when I incorporate creativity exercises into my courses on traditional subjects, I generally receive stronger analytical papers from my students, especially later in the term, than I do in courses in which I opt to eliminate creative assignments. This suggests that activating any creative responses in students can lead to advanced insights in more standard types of coursework. Circumstantial as this admittedly biased evidence is, it supports my proposition that if Honors educators want to teach critical thinking effectively, not only as a means in itself but also as a tool for determining solutions to problems beyond the academic sphere, then we need to integrate ways to enhance our students' creative faculties into our teaching. When we relegate artistic exploration only to courses in creative arts subjects, we teachers may be inadvertently denying our students the kind of learning that will enable them to grow into the complex thinkers we so want them to be.

Much as the motley court jester offers expanded possibilities unavailable to its Jack-in-the-box counterpart, I use creativity in my courses to encourage my students' thinking to escape from common box-like limitations in order to move flexibly and with artistic spontaneity in the expanded space and time of their intellects and imaginations. In literature and history, such court fools, costumed in contrasting colors and designs, integrate visual cues with their characteristic creative wit to alter cultural perspectives of the world in which they live.⁶ Similarly, I use creativity in my Honors classes to inspire in my students an enriched sense of their own individual possibilities for promoting growth and change in their professions. In addition, for me the image of the court jester is more than a literary conceit for making my point about the importance of bringing together the creative and the critical to form original thinking. For I was fascinated even as an undergraduate with this figure's efforts to generate cultural change by means of multiple-layered visual images and verbal innovations. This interest in fools and jesters initiated my academic shift from poetry to medieval studies as a profession. It also lured me to enroll in a course called "Fools and Clowns," my first college Honors course at the University of New Mexico, where many years later I now teach creativity to students in that same program.

Sometimes I miss my original dream of being a poet. But if I am honest with myself, more often I take secret pride in showing reluctant students in my more traditional classes that they too can put words or images together in a way which layers meaning, knowledge, and experience. Describing the goal of creative expression, Jacques Barzun writes, "Art distills sensation and embodies it with

meaning in memorable form.” My own professional and personal identity has developed, in part, from my explorations in creative expression; I hope, similarly, that my students learn to recognize richer possibilities within themselves by better tapping into their creativity. Honors teaching allows me to use the seemingly disparate elements of my own academic training and background to change how students think about themselves and their world. For me, integrating critical thinking with creative expression in my teaching seems a small step toward a larger goal. Yet, that small step reminds me of the nursery rhyme in which the lack of a nail causes the loss of an important war.⁷ As a teacher, I do not want any of my students who have the academic knowledge to understand the causes of cancer, pollution, global warming, alcoholism, or any other modern challenge to be helpless to effect change in such areas because they have no conception that a nail even needs to be made, let alone how to fashion one. By teaching them to access their creative faculties, I want them to be able to make whatever nails they may need in their future lives and professions. Most of all, as my first Honors course freed me from the limitations of my young dream and offered me movement in a multitude of professional directions, I want all my Jack and Jane students to be able not only to spring out of their boxes, but also to bound unconfined through as yet unimagined intellectual geographies.

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