
Title	What is creativity? Creativity as practiced in the Teacher Training Institution in Singapore
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WHAT IS CREATIVITY?

Creativity: as practised in the Teacher Training Institution in Singapore¹

G.F. Kneller in 1965 writes that “in our time creativity exercises a growing fascination. One reason is [...] the very elusiveness of the creative process which intrigues the inquiring mind, permitting it more than the usual freedom to speculate. But the main reason is that today, more than ever, we are realizing the need to educate in depth. Now that we have built a considerable body of knowledge about human behavior, of which creativity is a unique and invaluable aspect, education can no longer restrict itself to rote learning. Informed people insist that educators of all types add a third dimension to their task of cultivating human creativity in its finest sense.” (1)

His use of the word “creativity” in one of his earlier manuscripts was apparently questioned by the publisher’s editorial staff and subsequently by the printer’s galley proof reader. (2) It goes to illustrate too clearly the fuzziness surrounding the term and also the recency into which “creativity” as a concept is shot into prominence in the education world. This is borne out by the fact that in U.S. prior to 1950 out of 121,000 titles listed in the Index of Psychological Abstracts, only 186 were concerned with the problem of creativity. In U.K. it was after 1962, i.e. after the work done by Getzels and Jackson on “Creativity and Intelligence”, that interest in the subject was generated.

It is implied in Kneller’s statement that creativity is closely related to education as he maintains that all educators must add a third dimension to their work, which is that of cultivating human creativity. This of course gives rise to many questions of which some are as follows: Can human creativity be cultivated? If so, how can it be done? What then are the implications of this for education and educators? Obviously further investigation into what creativity constitutes and its relationship to learning is required, if educators are to do what is suggested.

Perhaps a clearer idea of creativity is called for before further discussion is attempted. Up to date the concept is still nebulous. Until recently the term is vaguely thought to suggest something rare and exceptional, something intangible which only a genius could possess. “Creativity” as a concept therefore defies even now a respectable definition, acceptable to all. There is a choice open, either of looking at it from a very specific and narrow viewpoint or of seeing it as a generic term extremely broad and comprehensive in meaning. In association with this, it is relevant here to state that it is not easy to define its meaning especially within the Asian concept. Furthermore, the fact that Singapore’s education system is a “carry-over” and an adaptation of the Western (British) model complicates the issue. As a matter of interest for educationists attempting to introduce elements of educational technology to the analysis of educational objectives, of which creativity is listed as one, then the warning to be given is that the term still remains so fuzzy that it would be difficult to do so. This is because for any rigorous analysis to take place, the breaking down of the concept into specific objectives would be necessary. To do this with “creativity” may result in the loss of the essence of its meaning.

Keeping such a situation in mind it would perhaps be useful instead to note definitions or explanations which have been given so far. It would be particularly helpful to find out what psychologists have found out about “creativity”. A dichotomous model connected with it was drawn up consisting of two modes of operation – it being none other

¹ Joint work of a group of TTC lecturers.

than the divergent and convergent modes of thought. It was believed that creativity was found in divergent thinking which means the tendency to pursue unexpected, novel, and tangential directions. Opposed to this is convergent thinking which means the tendency to follow a given lead, to obey instructions, to expect only one right answer.

But it was discovered by Liam Hudson that such clear-cut divisions are fallacious as he found that some individuals with an original turn of mind may possess a high degree of convergence.(3) Consequently it may be said that every individual possesses a complementary compound of both modes of thinking; the proportion of each mode present, determining the degree of creativity in an individual.

According to Richmond “divergence that is not nursed and incubated in convergent habit of mind is apt to be sheer lunacy ... What is called the creative act represents the consummation of a process of development which extends over a longish period of time. Its gestation varies from discipline to discipline.”(4) This may perhaps be interpreted to mean that a creative process in any person can only come about, if the basic ground work in the mastering of skills is well laid. In other words, what is characterized as convergent mental operations must precede divergent thinking. The skills would of course vary with each discipline. Skills in mathematics are very different from skills which are literary in nature. This is a very moot point for education because it warns educators to have their feet planted firmly on the ground (in the teaching of basic skills first e.g. of the three R's) before indulging in high flights of fancy (in the cloudy realm of creativity).

Richmond warns of the pitfalls of using the concept indiscriminately. For example “in so-called storming sessions in which anything goes and the participants deliberately set aside criticisms and common sense in the name of an alleged “Principle of Deferred Judgement”, Richmond states that “the fundamental error in ventures of this sort is to consider creativity merely as a kind of problem-solving ... For ‘creativity’ read ‘productivity’ and the shallowness of such advocacy is revealed.”(5)

V. Lowenfield who summed up present findings on the subject stated very simply the implications in the following quotation:

“Though we have barely begun to explore these implications we know that they go to the very heart of our teaching methods, the textbooks we use, the ways in which we design school curricula and so on. We know how that creativeness is not only the art teacher’s business, it is everybody’s business. We really only have scratched the surface, but we have made enough of a scratch to know that a whole new world of human potential lies underneath.”(6)

If creativity is to be thought of as a fulfilment of self through reaching for excellence then every man’s level of excellence would have to be his own. Artisan or artist, poet or scientist, each excels at his own level. It is to be believed that the level so mentioned could be raised and that the modes of creativity be brought within the reach of every man. In this assumption it is implied that the responsibility of implementing this would undoubtedly fall to the lot of the schools – schools being the institutions whereby the potential creativity of young people is either drawn out by the educative process, or repressed and stifled as the case may be.

Having gone through some of the many explanations and implications given to creativity especially in relation to education, it is appropriate now to discuss the “how” of cultivating creativity. Apparently E.P. Torrance writing in 1962 on how to guide creative talent

believed strongly in the possibility of cultivating it. He offered teachers some suggestions among which are:

- (1) make children more sensitive to environmental stimuli,
- (2) dispel the sense of awe of masterpieces,
- (3) provide for active and quiet periods,
- (4) make available resources for working out ideas,
- (5) develop a creative classroom atmosphere,
- (6) develop adventurous-minded teachers.(7)

Richmond went a step further and suggested a more systematic way of fostering creativity through education. He suggested that schools be re-structured physically to allow for greater flexibility in the use of space. As regards curricula, the suggestion was for the setting up of clear-cut objectives supported by the necessary changes in content, textbooks and aids. In methods of teaching the emphasis would be on discovery and greater individual attention, freedom and participation for the pupils. He gave an example of a “high creative” school to illustrate this. Any one interested in wanting to know more of the school could read “Experiments in Education in Sevenoaks”.(8)

Any discussion concerning “creativity” as specifically practised in the teaching training institution in Singapore must surely be prefaced by some information concerning the peculiar situation existing here. The uniqueness of the Singapore Teachers’ Training College (T.T.C.) lies in the fact that all would-be teachers in Singapore have to pass through its portals before being admitted as full members to the teaching profession. Of necessity its enrolment is enormous numbering at one stage 5,000 although today it stands at 2,000 with a staff of not less/_150. The courses are extremely numerous and /_than varied covering initial training, in-service training, training of technical, language and many other types of teachers. This variety is reflected in the range of differences in beliefs and attitudes existing in the College. This is soon in the work which the different departments in the College are doing, concerning the promotion of “creativity” in their courses. Many shades of meaning have been attributed to the term. As far as one can interpret or analyse the work done, a simple frame of reference is required other than that given e.g. in scholarly terms by Guilford in his construct of a three-dimensional model of intelligence where so far only 70 out of the 120 different abilities which make up the ‘structure of intellect’ had been isolated. At any rate an empirical analysis of the work done in the College in this area would not be possible at this stage or for a long time to come.

A simpler but more suitable frame of reference, arbitrarily chosen, comes from two British teachers, Beryl Ash and Barbara Rappapert. They wrote of the creative work done in a junior school in Britain. Describing their own experiences they wrote:

“In using the work ‘creative’ we are thinking of work that is personal to the doer, original either in idea or in the way in which it is communicated and work that requires some kind of involvement – that is, it must matter to the person who is creating.”(9)

From what is said three criteria can be identified which could be used to analyse the work done in the T.T.C. The three criteria are simple connected with:

- (1) ideas,
- (2) methods and
- (3) involvement that matters to the person doing the creating.

In the light of the three criteria established it appears that all departments of the College are concerned with criteria number (2) which is related to their methodology courses. Judging from the work done for example in the Science, History, Geography, Mathematics, AVA, Technical and Commercial Departments, this particular aspect is selected for special emphasis. For example, novel ways in methods are employed with the use of new materials and new combinations for the making of teaching aids in particular. These are seen in the assignments and projects given to individuals and groups of students. Students are given the freedom to work on their own. They are allowed to do what they want as long as they could finally produce something concrete. Some rather exceptional and original uses of scraps and commonplace materials have been thought of, by students, who turned them into attractive models unthought of before. The many exhibitions held of student work by the Art and Crafts, History, Geography and Home Economics Departments have very fine illustrations of the students' ingenuity in many areas.

As to criteria number (1) which deals with ideas it must be remembered that ideas and methods are sometimes extremely closely interlinked. What follows may be less identifiable as being related to either ideas or methods as no clear distinctions can be easily made. Connected more with methods perhaps at the level of verbal communication students are often encouraged to be more spontaneous and imaginative in story-telling, narration and dramatization. The English Studies Department is one such department actively engaged in doing this. Staff and students were only recently engaged in the organization of a poetry reading session, and public performance of a play called "The House of Bernarda Alba" by the famous Spanish playwright, Lorea. The play, if it has done nothing else, has succeeded in allowing the students to immerse themselves into roles which are extremely different from those they play in their daily lives. To do this requires a great deal of imagination, not to speak of other areas where opportunities to exercise their talent are available e.g. in make-up, stage lighting, the designing and making of stage props and costumes.

Another area of communication other than the verbal one is to be found in the written word. Here perhaps creativity in the region of ideas can readily be seen. The written word has been in use for long in the literary world where poems, novels, short stories, drama etc. are created. This tradition unfortunately has been lacking in Singapore because of many reasons, one of which is the multiplicity of languages present, a result of the migrant, plural society existing here. The same could perhaps be said too of verbal communication. Aware of the situation, the English Studios Department has initiated a creative tradition whereby students will be encouraged to develop their potentiality in the writing of poems and short stories not only for themselves but for their pupils later on. Up to date approximately 50 poems and short stories have been compiled, some of them showing much promise. Believing too that creativity does not exist in a vacuum, students are now being exposed to a wide range of literature in their course work. Commonwealth, North American and African authors form part of the reading list, thus lending to a more intimate knowledge of the variety of writing styles in the English language. This exposure is hopefully thought to lead to an awareness on the part of the students that even if the ideas in the works studied may not be original, as few indeed are, at least the way they are expressed with a new twist, is something worth noting and even worth experimenting with. As a matter of fact, the explosion of knowledge in today's world especially in the fields of science and technology makes it imperative that students should really be more aware of what is going on around them, beyond their immediate work. They should thus be aware of the great possibilities for innovation and creation that lie ahead of them if they want to be able to seize the opportunities now available.

Leaving aside the verbal and written channels whereby creativity can be expressed there are still the usual avenues normally associated with creativity open. They are familiarly known to be found in art and music. Both lend themselves readily to the creation of forms which appeal greatly to the senses. The very course in art and crafts in the T.T.C. itself can be described as creative in both ideas and methods, as every piece of work done by a student is his own creation, be it an oil painting, a silk screen painting, a piece of sculpture or any other item of art and craft work. From the choice of materials to the act of making the final product the student is left free to select and do what he will with minimal guidance from the tutor. Even if it is given it is only done at the request of the student. Hence also the third criterion which is that of involvement that matters to the person who is creating is easily establishing here. Indeed no self-respecting art and craft tutor or lecturer will "go over" the work of a student – work which matters greatly to him who has obviously executed it under an inner, creative compulsion existing within himself.

Music, one of the vehicles, for the expression of emotions through the medium of sound is undoubtedly also one of the best means for the expression of creativity. The T.T.C. Music Department tries its best to encourage creativity through music. Music and movement demands the translation of sounds into action. Students in doing this are able to create new designs of movement. Creation of novel rhythmic patterns and melodies also forms part and parcel of the course. For a few years in succession the T.T.C. has held an annual talent time (music) competition. The competition is open to all forms of music, both vocal and instrumental, pop and classical, oriental and occidental. This perhaps represents an effort to make students look within themselves for any hidden talent. It also challenges them to take up the initiative to develop their potential in music, thus acting perhaps as a first step towards things creative.

In the realm of physical education the trend is now towards experimentation with new patterns of movement. This allows for freedom for students to create rhythmic physical actions often performed to music. In fact a move is afoot to have more and more of dance and movement lessons based on both oriental and western types of dances. Some of the activities carried so far by the P.E. Department are listed as follows:

- (1) students exercise their bodies according to themes which are varied involving thus novel combinations of movement;
- (2) students employ physical action to explore the use of floor and aerial space in as imaginative a way as possible;
- (3) students participate in creative problem-solving e.g. in having to arrive at certain solution either or without aids when faced with obstacles.

From the discussion so far on Singapore, all the areas touched upon clearly possess the third criterion. The point is not so much the indication of the presence of this criterion but rather the mere difficult task of measuring the extent of personal involvement. To do this is well nigh impossible, for only the person who creates knows the extent of how much it matters to him. It is something so highly personal that it would be foolish even to try measuring.

Setting this aside it is possible to say that what has been discussed bears witness, however slight, to the fact that the Singapore T.T.C. is aware of the new trends in education especially that concerning "creativity", so aptly dubbed the "Unknown God" in educational theory by Richmond.(10) Creativity as presently practised in the College may not amount to much but it can be said that it has added another dimension to the lives of the students. What has been done so far perhaps is still largely done on the basis of trial and error which

may be identified ironically as the hall-mark of the concept. No one on the campus here is as yet any wise as to how much of what is done, is truly creative. Also it is not known whether attempts at creative work in the T.T.C. are transferred into the teaching practices of graduates of the College when they are finally placed in schools.

A great goal of hard work still obviously needs to be done about this, not only at College level but more so at school level and at the administrative level. This appears to be a universal problem as statements made of the situation related to creativity in the western world will show. It has been asked "Can it really be the case that, 'in the schools this creative energy is frustrated by regulations designed to keep masses of young people in order by making them behave in unison. It is frustrated, too, by tired, overworked teachers who cannot spare the time to nurture the creativity of the individual. [...] because they must struggle amid the impersonal job of administration detail to instil into their swollen classes the basic requirements of a stereotyped syllabus?'"(11)

To follow this up it has been stated by a well known sociologist Musgrave that "Our teaching methods, certainly up to the age of 16, tend to demand one right answer and throughout are marked by examinations which encourage standard answers. It may be that we turn children who are potentially creative into adults whose only wish is to succeed through conformity."(12)

The above quotations are posed not as criticisms of the system of education but more to indicate the need for redeeming the situation so that a concerted effort by all important educational institutions may be made to nurture and nourish the germ of creativity latent in the young, and to bring it forth to its fullest blossoming in every direction.

Footnotes:-

- (1) G. F. Kneller : The Art and Science of Creativity, p. iii, Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1965.
- (2) Kenneth Richmond : The Teaching Revolution, p. 38 Education Paperbacks, Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1967.
- (3) Liam Hudson : Contrary Imagination pp. 48/49, Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1966.
- (4) Kenneth Richmond : op. cit. p. 53.
- (5) Kenneth Richmond : op. cit. p. 39.
- (6) V. Lowenfield : 'Creativity: Education's Stepchild', A Source Book for Creative Thinking, p. 14 ed. S.J. Parnes and H.F. Herding, Scribner's, 1962.
- (7) Kenneth Richmond : op. cit. pp.57/58
- (8) Kenneth Richmond : op. cit. p. 61.
- (9) Beryl Ash and Barbara Rappaport : Creative Work in Junior School p. 10. Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1968.
- (10) Kenneth Richmond : op. cit. p.37.
- (11) G.F. Kneller : op. cit. p.69.
- (12) P.W. Musgrave : The Sociology of Education pp.138-9, Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1965.