Challenges in Developing Creative Thinking:
Building Visual Awareness and Confidence in University Students

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Abstract

Creative and critical thinking stimulate problem-solving abilities, all necessary for our fast-paced future. Over my fifteen years of teaching art at the university level, I have observed a slow erosion of imagination and innovation exhibited by my students. When asked where the best ideas come from, students too often reply, "The Web." Is this low-level of students' curiosity and innovation a possible result of high-stakes testing and one-size-fits-all curriculum? Or is it due to the daily bombardment of mind-numbing social media? Students demonstrate a reluctance toward projects that require original thinking, even when the topic focuses on themselves. Since the finished products cannot be found on the Internet, students seem unsure as to how to rely on their own imaginations to even get started. To combat such apprehension, I have designed projects of increasing difficulty and unfamiliarity for non-art majors to utilize internal reliance and self-analyses to enhance visual problem-solving. Through samples of student projects, I will share how a combination of instructor and peer feedback, both during studio work-time and individual presentations, provides the supportive environment in which originality and creativity potential begin to emerge.

Keywords: *Creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, imagination.*

1. Introduction

The need is real; stimulate problem solving abilities in today's students. Encourage out-of-the-box thinking skills, unfocused and broad, with no provided answers and only general directions toward an original idea [1]. The problems stem from multiple sources within our controlling educational system as well as living in a digital society fixated on self and screen time. These provide a slow erosion of imagination and innovation, compounded by high stakes testing, where creativity is not encouraged [2]. A deadening of curiosity beyond self has developed, fueling the myth that creativity is only for a gifted few while the rest are content with not thinking [3]. The result of the American "one size fits all" education model coupled with a simplified curriculum created to fit standardized testing. This model is stymied when it comes to measuring creativity, as measurement has become the cornerstone of achievement testing [2] [4].

I find my university students reluctant to approach projects that require original thinking. The reliance on spoon-fed solutions from a convenient electronic source contributes to their anxiety when their brain is the only source. Instant answers via the internet make their phones a digital crutch they can't live without [4]. They feel stripped and inadequate to puzzle out a visual problem without a phone or laptop computer but that is what I have them do. Their fear of making a mistake cancels out any thought of experimentation or exploring other possibilities. With each passing year, students are increasingly conditioned to follow the cattle chute of standardized expectations into the corral with the rest of the passive herd to chew on the cud of mediocrity.

2. Student metamorphosis: Inside the chrysalis

The classroom becomes a larval shell, a safe place to experiment, a dedicated no judgement zone where students can create without fear of ridicule [4]. Check your ego at the door. I expect and encourage an environment of cooperation and a sharing of ideas. Brainstorming with peers and professors leads to fresh ideas, the wilder the better, it just may lead to something workable [5]. Beghetto maintains that educators should model creativity for students through the act of teaching and encourage students to share their creativity in a supportive setting [6]. Collaboration is part of the process was well as being open to another's vision different from your own [7]. Consideration and determining a possible compromise can also be part of the process.

Trained in Art Education, I create student projects that are visual problems reflecting our highly visual society. My students are mostly non-art majors. They are uncomfortable and embarrassed by their lack of artistic ability. I start from where they are developmentally, usually a 5th grade level, the same as 95% of the general population, who stopped drawing around age 10. All human beings have distinct stages of artistic development, age 10, the age of Dawning Realism, is when they want to draw realistically but cannot, without what seems insurmountable practice and patience. Most people quit and their ability atrophies at that particular age. I have taught retirees anxious to become artists in their golden years only to relive long forgotten 10-year old drawing frustrations.

For my university students I grade them on their ideas, not their ability. To heighten interest the projects are student-centered, often focusing on their lives. This provides a platform of intrinsic motivation, they are able to define the projects on their own terms, able to choose what they want to do [5]. Project expectations are open-ended, rather than having exact directions, to prevent merely working extrinsically for the reward of a grade.

Students present their finished project to the class in our "judgment free safe zone". They stand and explain how a particular idea evolved, what it means, and how they executed it. Spontaneous applause usually erupts when each student is finished presenting. Speaking to their peers builds self-confidence in tandem with bringing their project to fruition.

My former art professor, Dr. Robert Nelson, would ask, "Where do the best ideas come from?" This rhetorical question was posed over and over again, but he never told us where; we had to figure it out on our own.

2.1 Collage as visual messaging

I found the answer everywhere by thinking creatively and divergently [8]. Using a "collage approach" to life and design, means taking snippets from far flung resources to create something new and original. We can "borrow" elements of other ideas, mix them into a visual pastiche. Images chopped up and distilled to make them untraceable to the original source and therefore any copyright infringement. The new image belongs to the creator, as well as the copyright, but the idea depicted is still fluid and open to multiple interpretations. In the *Collage As Visual Messaging* project, students create six collages based on different assigned themes: environmental, political, historical, emotion, humor, and the future, all without the use of words.

During the student presentations, the class must ascertain which collage represents which theme. It becomes a spontaneous and entertaining in-class Quiz Show that only the participants would understand. The collage messaging project is one of the seven projects that make up the course, *Stimulating Creative Behavior*. Each project builds in complexity, increasing visual awareness and creative thinking. Originality is always the key to creativity and paramount in every project [9]. But being original in a visually saturated world, is a challenge. Lawyers banking on population ignorance infringing upon copyright law are only too happy to sue the uninformed. Creativity can be a mine field.

2.2 Personal logo

I use my decades of work experience as a graphic designer in the publishing world as the basis for developing the *Personal Logo* project. Commercial art is an untapped resource of visual awareness for children growing up in a capitalist society. Students have been reading the commercial American environment, with its visual bombardment of signage and logos, since they were toddlers in car seats. I have taught a variation of this project to children as young as 3rd grade, with amazing results. They draw as many cultural symbols on one side of the paper and as many corporate logos as they can think of on the other. Then I ask what they would use for their own personal logo and ask them to sketch a few different ideas.

At the university level, we start comparing cultural symbols, like the Yin Yang, Star of David, and Christian cross with corporate logos. A good logo is like a cattle brand, simple and instantly recognizable. I tell my students the best thing about being an Art Director at a publishing house was making a quick pencil sketch of an idea and then passing it off to a designer who would then spend hours creating a finished proof. But this is not a publishing house and I ask for their best effort in creating their final logo.

To start, I require a minimum of five different ideas sketched out on an 8 X 10 sheet of paper. They are confronted with the wide-open spectrum of personal choice, daunting for some, the sky is the limit for others [6]. Some struggle to come up with five ideas, others fill both sides of the page. This is the

beginning of a process where peer judgement, evaluation, personal skills, and knowledge shared in the theoretical portion of the course come together [4].

These quick little pencil sketches are road maps through their thought process. The detours, dead ends, and straight paths all reflect their analysis of the possibilities, rejecting, revamping, ultimately leading them to their own best final destination. Often a decision needs to incubate, and a student will toss out the decided idea the following class and go in a whole new direction. Change is encouraged, but choices must be weighed as to which ideas are ultimately the best. Once a logo is decided upon in black and white the discussion of color begins. What are the psychological ramifications of different colors and color combinations? Is red too passionate? Is blue too cool? What message are you trying to convey through your logo? Is it strictly personal or for a possible business? Did you know that Madison Avenue fast food executives have designated orange as the color of affordability? Maintaining humor helps lighten the atmosphere, as students tend to become too serious, not wanting to make a mistake. In their class presentations, students must explain their choice and reasons for choosing particular colors, as well as what their logo means to them and how they arrived at the final design.

3. Butterfly Conclusion

The desired outcome of my course projects is intended to stimulate creative thinking and behavior among the general population of university students. Through a "students' process of exploration and inspiration they feel empowered with the knowledge and skills required to fulfill their own CIP, Curiosity, Interest, and Preference [1]. Another goal is to increase their visual awareness as to how to "see" and literally read the environment around them. I strive to instill ways to envision multiple possibilities for problem solving of any given project. The course is designed to instill in students the confidence required to initiate their best solution. Finally, I hope to help students realize they are creative individuals with the power to define their original ideas, verbally and visually [5].

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