



Commentary

On Children's Creativity: Defying Expectation

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ABSTRACT

Our definitions of creativity are varied and broad, ranging from the invention of small works to the achievement of global contributions. As arbitrary as they may be, our understandings generate stereotypical expectations for creative individuals and their behavior. I argue here that these expectations (from artistic work as a priori creative to originality as a criterion) may stand in the way of our appreciating children's artistic development and their acquisition of the necessary tools and confidence to find and break boundaries. I urge teachers to be creative themselves in their interpretation and acceptance of children's creative endeavors.

People have always told me I was “creative.” When I was little, I liked to draw and adults said I was “amazingly artistic” and “so creative.” What I liked about drawing was the worlds I could invent. For example, I would portray my classroom with my own versions of my classmates seated at desks arranged as I would have them, doing tasks that I invented as the director of the scene. At night, if I would wake up from a bad dream, my mother would suggest I try to dream the nightmare again but this time with a better ending. Not to forget a dream was like a movie and I was the director: the person in charge, the creative force behind whatever was afoot.

I used my drawings to design things, tiny-waisted 1950s evening dresses for idealized figures, high heel shoes (I had a great schema for making those) with or without polka dots or bows—whatever my creative inclinations were at the moment.

In adolescence, because I was creative, I wrote poetry instead of joining the science club. And indeed the poems were like my dreams—their content and direction in my control—a set of words bound together by rhythm and rhyme as determined by my creative vision and power.

When I struggled with (but enjoyed) mathematics in my cookie-cutter high school, the teachers said,

Not to worry. She's a creative type who will best succeed in the free arenas of the arts with no need for the rule-based constraints of mathematics and science. Surely a creative type like Jessica will blow up the science lab and flunk a mathematics exam.

These were the sort of stereotypical expectations that surrounded me and suited me well. Why reach for the hard-edged challenge of more prosaic domains when the soft contours of the arts would keep me safe and invite admiration from those who were less, shall we say, creative?

Perhaps unexpectedly, I went on to St. John's College where all students were required to take four years of science and mathematics and seminar and music and language and logic and there were no rain checks for creative students like me who would at any other institution be majoring in writing or theater or the visual arts. In this classical structured enclave, I learned a lesson that seemed to have escaped some of my teachers in high school. Euclid was a wildly creative guy and in reading his work, I was greatly inspired and loved not just to draw his elegant geometric figures, but also to experience the beauty of claims that built on each other and forged new ground. And how about Isaac Newton? When he experienced phenomena he couldn't explain in the available language and systems of the day, he invented a new vocabulary.

In my high school, when instead of writing a report on a country in the world, I invented one of my own, I was reproached. "Yes she's creative, but she has to learn to play by the rules, to color within the lines." Well Newton didn't believe that and neither did Euclid. They rewrote the rules and crossed the lines. They were creating worlds in their domains as surely as I had done in my dreams and drawings. Of course these world movers had to learn the territory and its borders before charging ahead; and so had I reviewed other countries and how they were framed before constructing a country of my own. But that diligence was not what my teachers expected from a creative type like me. There were no alternative modes of entry through the gates of their assignment.

From teaching and learning to world shaking and moving, creativity spans as many arenas of human thought as human beings can invent. And even as our perceptions may open and shut doors, we struggle for clear definition. I spoke recently with a high school student, a seventeen year old who excels at mathematics and science. He told me,

I think of myself as an artist because of how I see things. I never see things for what they are but for what they can be. I see a table and think, 'how would it look on its side or if somebody were hiding behind it?' (Davis, 2011, p. 35)

Is this not the essence of creativity? This imagining of possibilities beyond the given as in my reinvented classrooms and Newton's invention of the calculus.

One thing is certain. The word creativity is used with more frequency than clarity. Nonetheless, our various understandings have critical impact on children's development and the direction of their learning. Which child is creative? Which if any is not? My teachers thought that I was creative because I liked to draw and paint and write poetry. But I went to an elementary school where these activities were daily requirements that we all enjoyed (Davis, 2010). Did we all have a better shot at being creative than children who went to schools that excluded the arts? Are we all born with creative potential that is fostered or left to fade? And if fostered, toward what end?

What does adult creativity look like? The field-wide shifts that psychologists describe (for example, the invention of psychoanalysis or anti-balletic modern dance) in which whole systems of thought are expanded and transformed? Or the persistence and passion that keeps Aunt Martha painting seven hours a day without selling any of her work (Davis & Gardner, 1996)? And what about childhood creativity, as the early gift that writers and researchers have romanticized and celebrated since at least the turn of the century? We are all moved by the open expressivity of young children's drawings and many of us mourn the exchange of free-form emotion for the stiff "uncreative" stick figures that find their way into the work of children in middle childhood (Davis, 2005). Must you be Freud or Martha Graham to be truly creative? Or does the cherished expressivity of the young child or the ignored passion of Aunt Martha count as well? And who will be the judge?

Teaching art in the 1960s to elementary school-aged children, I admired the work of the youngest artists and longed for their creative immediacy. That "Oh here's a crayon and here's a line" kind of quicksilver rapport, so different from the weary

“What shall I draw?” refrain of the older children. The row of six little nine-year-old girls drawing flowers with smiles and perfect rainbows in blue skies—each landscape practically a replica of the others—would break my heart. Here surely, I thought, was the death of creativity.

But some researchers have recognized artistic development in the uniformity of these renderings, the agreed-upon box and triangle for a house, the stick and ball for the tree (Davis, 2005). They suggest that children at this stage are gaining vocabularies of forms, learning from one another the strategies and schemas that make for acceptable representations of what we see. “Come on girls,” I would plead without speaking, “be creative. Try drawing something of your own. Something different from the child sitting next to you.”

Was my restricted view of creativity as originality and difference out of step with the development I was unknowingly observing? Don’t we need to attain a vocabulary of conventional forms before we can break a boundary in the landscape of drawing? Did my unspoken disdain tell those girls that their participation in the sweet acquisition of shared images was a forbidden adventure?

On a day several years later, my son Benjamin, a first grader at the time, was late walking home from school. I was understandably distressed and he was duly apologetic. All of a sudden, a light went on in his head—an “Ah ha” moment creativity mavens might call it. “Wait a minute,” Ben said, “I’ll draw you a picture of what happened.” Charmed (don’t forget I too had been a creative child), I watched as he produced without hesitation a wonderful crayon drawing of a little boy bent over in some kind of discourse with a few snake-like creatures wiggling out of the earth. The rounded lean shape of the boy mirrored the shape of the creatures. “On the way home,” Benjamin explained, “I got into a conversation with a few worms.”



Fig. 1: Benjamin's first grade drawing circa 1978

I was naturally delighted by my son's wildly creative response to my concern. It was creative not only because he chose to tell his story in an image, not in words; but also because the drawing itself was so expressive—the articulated shapes responding to one another as if in genuine conversation.

Never one to limit the display of child art to refrigerator doors, I framed Ben's drawing and hung it with pride on our living room wall. Over time, it became apparent that Benjamin was less than delighted when folks would compliment him on his tour de force. Finally he confessed to me with great embarrassment that it wasn't his drawing at all. He had "stolen" it from a boy named Eric in his class. "Stolen?" I exclaimed. "I saw you draw it with my own eyes." "Yeah, but Eric made this drawing in class and I loved it. So I made it myself for you." He was ashamed.

How much of his attitude came from me? My persistent disappointment at the flowers and rainbows all in a row; my disinterest in the stick figures that children draw at a certain age, apparently relieved that their sticks and circles will serve as a visual short hand for "person." Or perhaps by first grade in Ben's progressive school,

originality was touted as an objective in art. “Make it your own.” “Don’t copy from your neighbor.” “Be creative.” Hadn’t Ben been creative putting to good use an image that he had admired in class? Wasn’t he creative lifting crayon to paper and realizing without hesitation the very marks that had inspired him earlier in the day?

If only Ben knew the number of great artists that collect and “copy” the artwork of children (Fineberg, 1997). Grown-up professional artists with work in art museums using as inspiration and theme the literal copy of a child’s drawing, without even mentioning (as Ben did with Eric) the name of the child from whom the image, in Ben’s words, was “stolen.” Miro, Klee, Picasso, and first grader Benjamin Davis. All creative artists who spoke for themselves through the representations of others. A generative recycling rather than blatant theft.

Creativity can be found in any realm of ideas from our dreams to our drawings to the breaking of boundaries in science or mathematics. As educators we need to think creatively about children’s expression. We must be open to alternatives and to performance that defies expectation. Only then may we find even in replication (traditionally the anathema of creativity) the development of the sort of aesthetic judgment and acquisition of vocabulary with which our students can go on to forge new and joyful directions of thought. Definitions and expectations offer clarity but they threaten to confine. How do we encourage children to make their own worlds and to feel comfortable using as media for their creations whatever inspiration they may find?

Benjamin’s admiration and re-creation of a drawing were early signs of the professional artist he grew up to be. Were I to turn the clock back several decades, I’d have celebrated the rainbow girls for their interest in their friends’ images and in the world of images that they themselves could create. My teachers, were they still around, would no doubt wish that they’d welcomed my reinvented assignment. Whatever our understandings of and aspirations for creativity, we must remember to remind children that they are the directors of the worlds they are creating, that their imagination and the imagination of others are what keep us moving forward. Creativity knows no bounds and neither should their thoughts. Take this from someone who has always been called “creative.”

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