



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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ENCOURAGING CREATIVITY

What is creativity and how can we encourage others to be more creative—more inventive and interesting? In this age of technological creep and multitasking, it is important to emphasize that creativity is a mysterious process that takes awareness and daring and more. Creativity is an image/idea and a process that makes college and life in general better.

Creativity is a slippery concept. It is about touching our inner being, both the minute and the infinite, then recording it in some form to translate feelings and ideas into symbols and words. We desire to make something and require a field in which to operate. So, symbol making—in whatever art form—is about making something in which someone else can participate.

Creativity allows us to see in new ways, take risks, and create hybrids from disparate fields (like Picasso adding images of African masks to his paintings, or scientists comparing Taoism and physics, or my friend and former professor, Ed Adler, who adds imagery from childhood action cards and his worldwide travels to his paintings). It requires a sense of excitement and discovery—that we can bring something new into the world, to put something where there was nothing.

Creativity is a journey about being open and friendly to new ideas, symbols, and ways of being. But we have to *want* to be creative—that is the first step. In the way that the stockbroker is fixated on stocks or the beekeeper on bees, the creative person is fixated on her materials. The one who creates lives in curiosity; Albert Einstein said: “The process of scientific discovery is, in effect, a continual flight from wonder.” We have to appeal to our adult sense of accomplishment and to our innocent, childlike sense of wonder.

Of course, creativity is not a panacea for what ails us. Being creative will not solve our problems. It is a hard road, sometimes filled with loneliness and frustration—e.g., the lives and works of Van Gogh or Virginia Woolf. However, their art forms brought them to special places and greater awareness. For the rest of us, it is enough to create.

It is sad to realize that many high school or college students who once were deeply artistic and found joy in writing stories and/or taping their drawings on the family refrigerator now do not have an art form in which to substantiate their creativity. Some scholars have observed that only children or trained adults create. That is the way for many; however, creativity can improve our lives in so many ways. It creates the world we inhabit. It also encourages honesty, authenticity, and openness. Creativity was there at the beginning, in cave paintings, grave goods, ancient storytelling, and the works of craftsmen/women of ancient times. Creativity is intrinsic to human nature.

Creativity requires some first steps, like an assignment or a desire to create. Allen Ginsberg observed that “first thoughts are best thoughts.” That is a very Zen way to create, flow with images, and have beginner’s mind. It is child-like and spontaneous. Galway Kinnell observed that a senior citizen once asked him what he ate for breakfast, leading him to write his famous poem, *Oatmeal*.

The unconscious is fundamental to creativity. We can go to sleep with a problem and wake up with a solution, or at least a softer path. But the unconscious—one of the mysteries of the universe—also makes creativity unclear and exciting. It opens us up to others, and that can be scary. Perhaps the highest form of creativity is a departure from the clichéd ways of being.

But is it enough to tell students to be more imaginative and creative, to seek and risk more? It is a start! It is easy to think that creating is something others do, or that there is enough stuff out there, so why bother. But creativity always matters—it helps us know ourselves and others better. If we do not create, then we abandon some of what we are to those more famous or bold.

For class assignments, we can push students to be more creative by encouraging them to know more and reach for more, to make more connections. As Jane Goodall observed, “We don’t know what we are capable of doing unless we really try.” We encourage our students to learn another language, visit museums, travel, read more, and study a variety of fields in a serious



way. Assignments that require more brainwork are solid steps in this direction. For example, we require students to write a paper on holistic health, from acupuncture and diet, to exercise and yoga. Whatever they choose requires them to look at the whole picture and see how all issues are related. We require more comparative/synthesis papers where students might compare ideas and images from various sources. We ask students to limit or avoid clichés and use original images and metaphors. Simplicity is often the key. We even give the advice that compassion and meditation are part of one's creative replenishment.

It helps if students want to be creative. It opens them up to deepening experiences. They recognize that they have something to say. Sometimes students feel constricted by handed-down ideas and tradition, paradigms and basic fear and conformity. But being creative has us confront our fears and transform our awareness into significant and colorful forms. It puts us more in touch with our inner being and therefore with others. Being creative makes us feel alive in the richest sense. Being creative replenishes us.

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