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**FOSTERING CREATIVITY ACROSS CULTURES**

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Creative self-expression is related to development and health, and as such should be supported whenever possible. Fortunately, there are a number of good methods for supporting creativity. The best methods for supporting creativity vary somewhat; age and cultural background need to be taken into account to ensure that they are effective. When age and culture are taken into account, the methods work very well. There is compelling evidence supporting their effectiveness. Creative potentials can be fulfilled quite easily.

Creativity can be supported by parents, teachers, businesses, and even communities. As a matter of fact, it is very important that support is offered by everyone involved. A child growing up in a family that encourages creativity, in a culture that values creativity, with teachers who support creativity, has excellent chances of fulfilling his or her creative potentials. If any one of these (parental support, educational support, cultural values) is lacking, the chances diminish.

## BASIC GUIDELINES

Parents and teachers should (a) *model* creative behavior, (b) *provide opportunities* for children to practice creative self-expression, and (c) ensure that *rewards* rather than punishment is given for original thinking. The last of these may sound intuitively obvious, but original thinking is by definition different and unconventional, and parents and teachers often prefer conventional behavior. They may, therefore, reward only conventional thought and action and thereby fail to reward the unconventional thinking that leads to creative

behavior. Of course, what is really needed is a judicious plan for rewards. Sometimes it is best for children to conform, so they fit in. At these times parents and teachers should reward conventional behavior, and even conformity. Yet, other times, original thinking is useful, in which case the adults may need to shift their attentions and responses *such that* they are rewarding behaviors that are atypical and contrary to convention. In other words, the ideal is to support maturity, and maturity in turn requires the capacity to fit in, as well as the capacity for creative self-expression.

Modeling is a social learning method that describes the demonstration of original behaviors. When adults model creative behavior (i.e., are creative themselves), it is likely that children will imitate it. Furthermore, when an adult models creative behavior, it sends a message, namely, that creativity is a good and desirable thing. Children will therefore learn both from the adults' overt display of creativity, and they internalize a value system that appreciates originality and creativity.

Much more can be said about values as they are related to creativity and its development. In fact, values must be considered to understand how cultures differ in terms of support for creativity. Values are therefore relevant to decisions about what strategies are the most meaningful in different cultures.

Before exploring values, the idea of *practice* should be related to creative self-expression. It is no surprise that practice leads to growth and improvement, but what may not be as obvious



is that the most effective kind of practice is “displaced.” This simply means that the creative behaviors are practiced at one point in time (and appropriately rewarded), but then attention or assignments are turned to other kinds of thinking and activities, and after a time the attention turns back to creative behavior. Thus, there is displacement in that opportunities for creativity are disbursed over a long period of time, with other things also intermittently covered. Displaced practice insures that creative self-expression will be developed in a manner that will not be forgotten or ignored.

The term “appropriate rewards” was just used. Rewards must be appropriate because creative self-expression is something that children do naturally. It is a part of play and intrinsically motivated. Just as you do not have to carefully reward children so they learn to play, so too is self-expression a natural and spontaneous behavior. Still, it can be supported, as long as the rewards offered do not replace the natural inclinations. Research suggests that if something is intrinsically motivated, like play and creative self-expression, but blatant incentives and rewards are offered, the natural inclination is actually lost. Rewards can help something new be learned, but if children already play and use their imaginations, they do not need much additional reinforcement.

### **MINDFUL CREATIVE SELF-EXPRESSION**

What exactly should be practiced? Children need the opportunity to do what, exactly? The answer to these questions depends on the age of the individuals involved. Younger

children (before approximately age 7 or 8) should be given able opportunities for imaginative play and self-expression. Children in the later primary grades, in contrast, should be given opportunities to learn the importance of being an individual. Individuality is key for creativity, and for self-expression.

Individuality is critical as children approach pre-adolescence because there is great pressure towards the opposite, towards conformity. That pressure leads many children towards an exaggerated connection with peers, to the extent that they rarely express their own individual ideas. Their friends become all-important. Although social behaviors such as cooperation and collaboration are important for children to master, too often children go too far and are, as a result, too rarely creative. There is in fact a common “slump” in the later primary school years, no doubt because of an exaggerated connection with peers. Recall here that creative thinking is tied to originality and individuality, so if the person is overly conventional, it is very difficult to be original and creative.

At the end of the primary years students should practice making the decisions that lead to a good balance. In particular, they should practice deciding if they are in a situation where it is best to be conventional (e.g., when taking a test about factual knowledge, for school, or an exam for a driver’s license) or in a situation where self-expression and originality would be fitting. To this end it would be useful to ensure that the benefits of creative self-expression are clearly communicated to the children. Here are a few of the benefits:

- Creativity is related to physical and psychological health.
- Creative thinking makes problem solving easier.
- Creativity facilitates the adaptations that allow a person to cope with everyday hassles.
- Creativity can also be fun. It adds to the richness and quality of life.

If children (and adults!) realize these things, they are likely to look for opportunities to express their creativity.

Mature students should also practice thinking *tactics* that lead to creative ideas. These tactics increase the likelihood that ideas and solutions will be original, useful, and creative. They are often quite simple, as exemplified by the tactic, “question your assumptions.” This reminds the individual to only mindfully follow routine and habit, and to pay attention, even when the situation or problem seems like it has been seen before. Other tactics for creative thinking include “change the problem,” “ask questions,” “shift your perspective,” and “incubate.” The last of these suggests that the individual take some time, and perhaps even put the problem aside for a while, rather than trying to work quickly and all-at-once. Incubation allows the mind to relax and increases the probability that original ideas will be found. Obviously incubation can be encouraged by parents or teachers. Assignments can be opened, to allow students’ own thinking about the subject, and deadlines can allow the students to put an assignment aside and come back to it later - after incubating.

### **MORE ON CULTURE AND CREATIVITY**

Several of the ideas mentioned above have a kind of cultural relativity. It is probably most realistic to think of creativity as partly culture-specific and partly universal (shared by all cultures). Consider, for example, the idea that the encouragement of creativity follows directly from cultural value systems. This dynamic actually operates on all levels: cultures that value creativity encourage it (and when the values are clearest, there is a renaissance!). Businesses that value creativity tend to reward it, and innovation is quite likely. Children raised in homes, or attending schools, where creativity is appreciated will develop and express it. Recall here the idea that if parents and teachers model creative behaviors, they are not only demonstrating how to be creative. They are also communicating the idea that creative action is a good thing. Children will internalize that idea; they will include creativity in their own value systems. When that happens, children will themselves invest effort accordingly and will behave in a fashion that is consistent with those values. They will try to be creative.

Not all cultures support creativity the same way, however, and in one manner of speaking not every culture supports creativity to the same degree. This is in part because creativity requires some sort of originality. It may be novelty, or an unconventional tendency, but one way or another creative things are original. Creativity requires more than originality - creative ideas are useful, effective, appealing, or solve a problem - but cultural variations mostly reflect originality. Some cultures emphasize harmony, getting along, and fitting in. They do not value independence because it is contrary to collectivistic traditions. It is more difficult to be original in collectivistic cultures than it is in individualistic cultures.

Fortunately, creativity can be expressed in many different ways. Thus, the creativity that is the most fitting in collectivistic cultures is consistent with harmony and social tradition. Collectivist creativity is authentic and aesthetically appealing, even if not radical and contrarian. Creative thinking may even be directed at harmony and social tradition! This would occur when the creative ideas actually solve social problems or facilitate collaboration and mutual understanding, or perhaps the resolution of conflict.

Note that, regardless of the culture, parents and teachers can still model creativity and convey the idea that it is something they will appreciate. Parents and teachers can provide opportunities for creative self-expression, in any culture, and they can reward and encourage it - even if the particular behaviors targeted vary from culture to culture. Along the same lines, the tactics practiced may vary, as well. A good example of this is the “shift perspectives” tactic. In a collectivistic culture, students may practice shifting perspectives by imagining what others would think about the problem or situation. This is consistent with social tradition. In an individualist culture, the “shift perspective” tactic may involve something completely different, such as “try something that no one else has tried.” And some tactics work across the board, in any culture. “Turning the problem upside down,” “break the situation down into small pieces,” or “how would you approach the situation if you were a cartoon character?” are examples of broadly applicable tactics.

The last of these implies that playfulness may be a universal for creativity - and it is. Play is always a good thing. Play is naturally self-expressive. When playing, there is a freedom and flexibility that insures creativity. Interestingly, the same cultures that emphasize individuality frequently relegate play. More accurately, they expect children to outgrow play. They expect

maturity to involve logical rather than playful approaches to problems, at least when the individual reaches adolescence. For this reason such individualistic cultures are at a disadvantage. Playfulness is conducive to creative thinking at any age. Adults might have more creative solutions to problems if they tried to play with the situation instead of relying only on cold logic. Playful adults will also be good models for children. They would demonstrate that it is good to be playful, flexible, and creative, at least some of the time.

Implicit in this description of play is a very important concept. It is related to the relationship of the tactics to be practiced and the values to be modeled. The important concept is “mindfulness”, which in turn refers to conscious choices. Tactics and values are related because they both recognize that creative behavior is often a choice. When creativity is a part of a person’s value system, he or she will choose to be creative, whenever it is possible or reasonable. Similarly, tactics are only used mindfully, when the person is aware that it will be a good idea to employ a particular tactic. This concept of mindfulness, and its connection to choice, may be the most important message of this essay. That is because it underscores the fact that parents and teachers should be mindful and continually consider how to make the decisions that will support the development of creative behaviors of children.