Cultivating Rigorous Creativity

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Cultivating Rigorous Creativity

Many educators think talking about creativity in an academic setting is somehow akin to debating the nutritional value of a Fluffernutter sandwich. But I would argue that demanding creative thinking from students is the most rigorous of expectations.

Three decades ago, when I was an aspiring teacher, critical thinking was considered the pinnacle of a liberal education. And while secondary schools in this country have pretty much failed to teach students to think critically, universities, by and large, continue to see it as the Holy Grail.

I contend, however, that it is not enough to cultivate critical analysis amongst our students no matter what level of education they might be pursuing. We must go beyond analysis and critique. We must insist that our students engage in the rigorous process of creative thinking. Not only is creative thinking a rigorous demand to make of our students, it can also be the key that unlocks the castle gates behind which the Holy Grail resides. One cannot possibly engage in creative thinking without applying the tools of critical thinking. But critical thinking by itself is a dead-end.

In a recent op-ed piece in the New York Times, Michael S. Roth, the president of Wesleyan University, remarked, “Of course, critical reflection is fundamental to teaching and scholarship. But fetishizing disbelief as a sign of intelligence has contributed to depleting our cultural resources. Creative work, in whatever field,
depends upon commitment, the energy of participation and the ability to become absorbed…”

Roth is right, of course. Creative thinking, which requires committed participation and absorption, is often sacrificed at the altar of “disbelief.” But one does not need to obliterate the other. In fact, the two can peacefully coexist and feed each other. After all, a creative thinker is always thinking critically, and truly critical thinking always requires some degree creative imagination. Creative thinking and critical thinking are symbiotic twins that need not be at war with one another.

It’s true, however, that the cynicism which arises from critical thinking in the absence of creative thinking has left our world in a mess. Have a look around: the polar icecaps are melting; journalists are being beheaded in the desert; the Apple Corporation has taken over the world; the federal government is stockpiling our phone records; Wikipedia and Google have convinced all of us that a ten-minute search can tell us everything we will ever need to know about quantum physics; and the Pope is driving around Vatican City in a 1984 Renault! We are obviously on the road to extinction. Critical thinking alone will not save us. It will only make us more cynical. We need creative solutions for the problems of the 21st century.

As Tim Elmore insists in his book Generation iY: Our Last Chance to Save Their Future, “We are preparing students in left-brain schools to enter a right-brain world.” Elmore explains: “The left brain is about knowledge. The right brain is about creativity. The left brain is calculated and definitive; it’s about data. The right brain is innovative and dynamic; it’s about art. Certainly both are necessary. But more and more our world is driven by right-brain thought..."
While Elmore’s view may oversimplify the current academic and cultural circumstances, not to mention and the workings of the human brain, his argument is not entirely without merit. We expect our students to know things, but we rarely ask them to do things that require creative imagination.

There are numerous obstacles facing educators who believe in the power of creative thinking. For starters, there are the students themselves. By the time they reach the secondary level and beyond, their creative instincts have been siphoned out of them by schools that do not recognize the importance of creativity or are distracted by political pressures for “excellence” or are simply intimidated by the prospect of trying to teach creativity.

As Sir Ken Robinson points out in his famous Ted Talk, “schools kill creativity.” This is true at all levels of schooling, though I am most intimately aware of the ways in which it happens at the secondary level. I’ve taught everything from fourth grade through graduate school. But I have been teaching high school English for twenty-five years, and I have seen some monumental changes in secondary education in that time. Before we can examine the idea of infusing creativity into the university curriculum, we need to acknowledge what kind of secondary education these students are receiving.

When they enter the university, most students arrive from an environment that is obsessed with preparing kids for multiple-choice, standardized tests. In my discipline, we have dumped valuable, spirited, explicit instruction in reading, writing, speaking, and listening in favor of an endless cycle of lifeless lessons on comma rules.
And that’s the best of what we do at the secondary level. At our worst, we actually devote sacred classroom time to teaching kids test-taking strategies—everything from “make sure to cross your legs during the test so that both parts of your brain are working” to “when in doubt, guess ‘B.’” Oh, and don’t forget to get eight hours of sleep, eat a good breakfast, and always carry an extra No. 2 pencil!

This is what we are covering in our classrooms instead of teaching reading skills that might help kids understand and appreciate Shakespeare or the New York Times or instructions on how to assemble a backyard grill. This is what we are covering instead of practicing public speaking. This is what we are covering instead of engaging students in the art and craft of writing. This is what we are covering instead of teaching listening skills that could completely alter the outcome of a failing economy (or a struggling marriage)! The good news is these kids who show up on ivy-covered university campuses are desperately hungry for creative expression even if they don’t yet realize it.

There are other obstacles to cultivating creativity amongst these students, of course. In addition to political pressures from inside and outside of the academy, cultural bias about creative thinkers comes into play here to a certain extent too. And we don’t have to look very far to find this sort of bias. Anybody who knows his way around Wikipedia can tell you, for instance, that there are “Five Theories of Creativity”—none of which paints a very admirable portrait of the creative thinker.

There’s the “Psychoanalytic Theory,” which basically says creative people are more in touch with the ugly stuff churning in the Id than the rest of us. There’s the “Mental Illness Theory,” which insists that creative types actually suffer from mental
disorders. There’s the “Theory of Psychoticism,” which identifies the creative individual’s disorder as a “psychotic tendency.” Then there’s the “Addictive Theory,” which states that creative folks are addictive by nature, and their addictions fuel their creativity. And finally, there’s the “Humanistic Theory,” which argues that one must be fully self-actualized (as Maslow defined it), in order to create. So basically, to be creative, one must simply be an insane, self-actualized stoner.

Partly because of theories like this, people gravitate toward critical thinking endeavors over creative ones. They choose what they see as “substance” over what they have come to see as “fluff,” or worse, as insanity! Because let’s face it, unless you’re drunk, crazy, or in love with your I’d, what use could you possibly have for creativity, right?

Other obstacles include colleagues, administrators, and ourselves. Too often, we, too, hold certain skeptical beliefs about creativity that block our ability to teach it effectively. For example, many of us have come to believe that “Not everyone is creative.” This is a flat-out lie. Dreaming is evidence of creative thinking. If you can do it in your sleep, you can do it when you’re awake! Or how about this one: “Creativity can’t be taught”? Balderdash. It is a mental process, and like any process, it can be taught.

The process, I think, works something like this: we are exposed to an intellectual stimulus (a text, let’s say); we come to an understanding (perhaps with some help) of what the stimulus means; we examine the stimulus critically to determine its validity; we synthesize the meaning of the text with prior knowledge
(experience, observation, and other texts, for instance); then (if we are so-inclined or so-inspired), we create something new from the knowledge we have observed, interpreted, analyzed, and synthesized. The “something new” can come in the form of an assessable response to the stimulus, a response that taps into the traits we commonly associate with creativity.

*Creative Traits and How to Cultivate Them*

Experts associate creativity with a specific set of character traits. These traits give birth to creative impulses and must be cultivated in our students if we want them to begin thinking creatively in the classroom.

For instance, we often associate inquisitiveness with creativity. Creative thinkers seem to have an insatiable appetite for questions that examine the *why* and *how* of things, but how do we cultivate such inquisitiveness? Well, for starters, never ask a question that has only one answer, except perhaps at the outset of a discussion when you are attempting to establish the existence of a particular problem that needs to be solved. (e.g. Has humanity scientifically and definitively proven the existence of God? The obvious answer is no. Okay, so the problem has been established. From this point forward ask only questions that have many possible valid answers.) Questions that ignite a firestorm of thoughts will always spark creativity. Teachers who want to inspire creative thinking must instill inquisitiveness.

We must also model humor in the classroom and we must encourage it from our students. Humor and creativity are as interlocked as Pee Wee Herman and his
Hobby Horse. We can laugh like Ed McMahon or Paul Schaffer when someone makes a clever joke. We can tell embarrassing stories. We can employ self-deprecating humor. Whatever it takes—laughter is essential in the classroom! It breaks down barriers and makes the mind more receptive to new possibilities.

And since creativity and playfulness are often closely linked, our assignments need to be downright silly sometimes. We must tap into that childlike enthusiasm for the absurd that we associate with creativity. Think of the “mantis shrimp prompt” posed by the University of Chicago to its undergraduate applicants last year. The prompt essentially asks students to imagine life as a mantis shrimp. When I read that prompt aloud to my students, it elicits three immediate and simultaneous responses: laughter and excitement and fear. That’s how you know it’s an effective prompt.

Also, since creative thinkers are often risk takers, we need to honor the value of risk-taking by reducing the risk involved in taking risks. Your students will be dangerously grade-conscious, no doubt. Give them assignments that are counted for completion points; everyone gets full credit just for trying. Or make a small portion of the grade for effectiveness and a large portion for completion. This will reduce the fear factor, and give the students greater license to experiment. It will also send the message to them that you value their ability to take risks. If you want your students to think creatively, you’ve got to teach them to develop a willingness to gamble and a willingness to fail.

Creative types tend to crave variety and appreciate surprises too, so never give the same type of assignment twice. Stretch your imagination when creating a
prompt. Demand creativity from yourself as well as your students. And respond to your own prompts to create models for your students. Are the prompts appropriately demanding? Do they tax your own creative abilities? If not, trash the prompts and start over.

We must cultivate novelty and originality, which creative types tend to crave. Don’t allow students to settle for the first thing they think of; make them dig deep. Allen Ginsberg used to say, “First thought, best thought,” but he was dropping acid at the time, so his “first thoughts” were pretty unusual. At the very least, insist that your students make old ideas new somehow. Don’t let them fall back on cliché thinking or cliché expression: “When I’m nervous, I don’t have ‘butterflies in my stomach,’ instead I feel like I have monarchs and moths slam dancing in the mosh pit of my digestive track.”

It’s also essential that we fuel a healthy distrust of authority, an unceasing suspicion of those who tell us what to think because creative thinking is often a rebellious act. Establish an us-versus-them mentality in your classroom. It doesn’t matter who the “them” is—the government, the university administration, Sigmund Freud, whoever. Creative energy is inspired when people do battle with an adversary of some sort!

Cultivating creativity means inspiring students to twist, bend, and reshape existing ideas. Encourage your students to manipulate or even rewrite your prompts, for instance. In order to cultivate creativity, we have to demand that our students “rearrange the rules” as Truman Capote once said. In fact, we have to go so far as to require it. This will make many of them uncomfortable. Good. Discomfort
is the fertilizer of creativity. Discomfort breeds anxiety. Anxiety gives birth to creative impulses.

To a certain extent, we may also have to bolster confidence. Play Tommy Lasorda. Pump them up! Encourage them to believe that they have something of value to offer that is as unique as their fingerprints. It may sound corny, but to be an effective educator, you must be a bit of a cheerleader. Sure, you’re going to be teaching some of the smartest kids in the country. You know that. But do they know it? Do they believe in themselves? Or are they so intimidated by all the brilliant brains around them that they think they are average by comparison? The audacity to think creatively requires self-confidence, so never miss an opportunity to praise students whenever they do something that is praiseworthy! And don’t be afraid of encouraging a tiny bit of arrogance. The arrogant ones always think they can do it better. And they are usually right.

Metaphorical thinking is perhaps the most essential trait of all. Creativity needs metaphor like McCartney needed Lennon. If you want students to employ metaphor, you have to model it. The best thing you can do as an educator is to use metaphorical thinking when you instruct. Offer comparisons and analogies. The most powerful words you can say if you want to encourage creative thinking, are “It’s sorta like...” as in “Buddhism is a lot like my grandmother’s pot roast...”

Equally as important is cultivating the kind of awareness that comes only from thinking critically. Yes, critical thinking will lead to disillusionment and possibly cynicism, but it is an essential pre-requisite to creativity. We have to be aware of the obstacles we face if we are going to try to overcome them. (Think of
Dostoevsky’s stone wall in *Notes from Underground.* If we are afraid to make our students squirm in the mire a little, we cannot expect them to look for solutions to very real and important problems. Or as one sociology professor from U of C Santa Barbara said recently in regards to “trigger warnings” on literary texts, “The presumptions that students should not be forced to deal with something that makes them uncomfortable is absurd or even dangerous.” We’ve got to offend their sensibilities if we want them to seek creative solutions that foster justice. Rile them up. Make them see the stone walls around them. Make them taste real existential angst. Complacency is the antidote to creativity; it will crush any creative spirit that might be churning in your students.

We need to allow our students to be destructive. Let’s face it, they have to tear it down before they can rebuild it. This applies to the ideas of others, but it also applies to their own ideas. They need a fearless disregard for the damage caused by dismantling. Without it, there can be no creation.

Somehow, if we want to teach creativity, we must also honor the natural human desire to transcend. Help students acquire a healthy faith in the power of the mind. Inspire them to trust that their minds can connect them with something larger. (Maybe even something mystical!) Because you are more than a teacher of a particular subject matter. Remember, everyone wants to be awakened from the dream of living; everyone wants to see the dawn.

Teach compassion too. Model it. Demand it with the way you structure your assignments. Creative thinkers are empathic. They can imagine what it feels like to walk around in somebody else’s moccasins. It’s not enough to examine a concept
from a distance; if we are to think creatively about a subject, we must cut it open and step inside its flesh. Imagination is the fuel for the creative engine because it forces us to adopt alternative perspectives. Modeling and inspiring compassion will accelerate the creative impulse.

A desire to solve problems is inherent in many creative thinkers, so build your assignments and prompts around implied or explicit problems that have an infinite number of solutions. Confound your students with your unceasing demand for solutions. Make their brains hurt!

Creative thinkers are often highly motivated, so demand a disciplined work ethic. No rest for the weary. They need to see this creativity business as the pinnacle of their education. We are teaching them more than what to think; we are teaching them how to think. How to be aware, how to weigh the odds, how to make choices, how to execute those choices, how to evaluate their own success, and then how to start over again and again even in the face of insurmountable odds. (How to keep banging their heads against Dostoyevsky’s stone wall.)

**Designing Assessments that Cultivate Creativity***

In order to cultivate these “creative traits” in the classroom, we need to examine the ways in which we design assessments. In liberal arts at the university level, writing is often used as an assessment tool. A student’s understanding of a text is usually evaluated based upon a written response to that text. With that in mind, let’s consider what kind of writing assignments we give to our students.
Since most students receive little, if any, direct instruction in writing at the high school level these days (outside of being taught overly simplistic formulas that reveal little, if any, actual thinking of any sort), we have to be careful when using written expression of an idea as an assessment tool. Are we grading the idea, or are we grading expression of the idea—in essence, the writing? And if we are grading the writing as well as the idea (which seems inevitable), then what have we done to ensure that the writer understands our expectations and is capable of meeting them, and furthermore, how can we ensure that our writing prompts will foster creative thinking?

Let me suggest a methodology for constructing writing prompts. For starters, the prompt itself must tap into the creative process; it must cultivate the traits we associate with creativity. And after we invent creative prompts, we should always respond to the prompts ourselves as I’ve already indicated. It is time-consuming, but if we want our students to succeed, we will find the time to do it. We teachers need to respond to our own prompts in order to find out if they are reasonable and logical, but we also need to find out if the prompt taxes our own creative process. (If it makes us a little uncomfortable to respond to our own prompts, that’s probably a good sign.) Also, the teacher’s response can become a model for students. (Models are essential if we want our students to succeed. A good model always inspires thoughtful responses from students.) After responding to the prompt ourselves, we need to develop a grade sheet that clearly identifies the elements we will be looking for when we grade the students’ papers. A simple checklist will do. We can use these checklists when assigning a holistic grade.
As for ensuring that the prompts demand creative thinking, we have to devise prompts that cultivate the creative traits and engage the creative process by making use of creative genres. If we want our students to immerse themselves in a text, for instance, they don't always have to write essays. While there are enough expository modes of exposition to keep student writers busy for an entire semester, these modes sometimes fall short of immersing students in a text in an intellectually intimate (or creative) way. Sometimes, it might be worthwhile to ask students to respond to a text in an alternate genre that taps into the traits we associate with creativity.

If we are willing to entertain the possibility that a thinker can think and express his thoughts in a variety of written forms that extend well beyond the essay, then why not entertain the possibility of designing writing assessments that ask students to compose narratives or poems or dramatic dialogs or letters or speeches or short documentary films? Evaluating these genres makes us a little nervous. A teacher who does not see himself as a poet will find it difficult to judge someone else’s poetry.

But it’s really not that complicated. Let’s say you want a student to analyze a particular work of art. Why not ask that student to write a found poem that reveals some research and employs poetic devices to reveal the student’s attitude toward the work of art in question. Now, how will you grade this? Simply, create a checklist of things you want to see the student reveal in his/her poem: 20-25 lines of unrhymed verse; evidence of research; ample use of poetic devices (imagery, figurative language, line break, rhythmic repetition, etc.); clear appreciation for the
key physical elements of the artwork; an "interpretation" of the artwork; an analytical response to the artwork that examines its importance within the context of its movement. Type up your list and give it to students so they know what you will be looking for when you grade the poem. Then simply read each poem, check off the items you were able to find present in the poem, and give the thing a holistic grade. As the old saying goes, it ain’t rocket science.

What’s most important about an assignment like this is that it would activate the creative juices by asking students to make a new creative work in response to an existing creative work. Yes, critical thinking will be part of the process that yields the student’s response, but it won’t be the end of the process. Instead, the final product—the poem—will represent the evidence of creative thinking, and those who engage in creative thinking will be far more in tune with the original intellectual stimulus that inspired the process in the first place, and quite possibly, more in tune with the creative impulse that gave birth to the artwork in question.

Personally, I believe creative thinking should be the ultimate goal of all of our academic endeavors. By engaging students creatively, we demand so much more from them than we do when we just ask them to just interpret and analyze.

Too often we think of creativity as a fluffy thing. But there is nothing fluffy about it. And it is not a magical skill that only a few select humans possess. It is a rigorous process that goes beyond critical thinking and has the potential to solve the problem of our growing cynicism.
The truth is, creativity is the only way to plug the holes in the sieve that emerge when we engage only our analytical minds. And because creative thinking awakens the mind and the spirit at the same time, it requires that our brains and hearts collaborate in a dialogue that can enlighten us, set us free, and maybe even save us from extinction.

* See the “Cultivating Rigorous Creativity” lecture packet for examples of assessments with models and grade sheets.
Cultivating Rigorous Creativity

Sample Assignments in the Humanities

Contents

A Philosophical Dialog—“An Evening with Freud, Kant, and Darwin.”

A Spiritual Narrative—“The Buddha Takes a Bath.”

Responding to Art—“From the Foam.” A found poem inspired by Botticelli’s Venus.

A Letter from the Past—A persuasive letter from Immanuel Kant to Arnie Duncan.

Choose three authors whose work we have studied, and write a dialog in which these authors discuss or debate their views on humanity. Write the dialog in script format and be sure to incorporate relevant quotations from the original texts that inspired the dialog. Offer explanations of the quotes that reveal your understanding of the material. The dialog must have some closure at the end. Perhaps the speakers come to an agreement, or they agree to disagree, or one of them storms off in a huff, but somehow the scene must be resolved. See the mini-model below for inspiration.

An Evening with Freud, Kant, and Darwin

FREUD: My friend, “Civilization will not yield to any attempt at reform.”

KANT: First of all, I am not your friend. Second of all, you are a fool.

FREUD: I speak the truth, and you know it. Civilization, like man himself, is doomed to forever be driven by its most base impulses. “Why should I love my neighbor?”

KANT: If I spent my days snorting cocaine in the company of lunatics, I suppose I would agree with you. But I spend my time in the company of the enlightened.

FREUD: To think enlightenment is possible is the only lunacy! (And don’t knock coke till you’ve tried it.)

KANT: As long as men do not allow themselves to be controlled by the “guardians of society,” they may attain intellectual enlightenment.

FREUD: You’re a madman! Without your so-called guardians imposing order, society would be in ruins.

DARWIN: Ziggy, I’m going to have to side with Manny on this one. Man may bear within him “the indelible stamp of his lowly origins,” but it is his “god-like intellect” and his “benevolence” that have helped him rise to the top of the food chain. If we accept that these traits are selected for, rather than against, there is indeed hope for mankind.

And so on...

Bibliography

Freud, Sigmund. “Civilization and its Discontents.”
Kant, Immanuel. “What is Enlightenment?”
Grading Criteria

Your dialog must do all of the following:

_____ accurately depict the views of three authors;
_____ include relevant quotations;
_____ offer explanations of relevant quotations;
_____ be written in script format;
_____ include a simple bibliography;
_____ create argumentative tension;
_____ provide closure at the end;
_____ be carefully proofread and copy edited;
_____ be at least five pages double spaced.

Teacher Comments:

Grade = ______
What is the Core of the Teaching?

A Spiritual Narrative

Choose a spiritual leader (e.g. Buddha, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed), and write a narrative that illustrates a turning point in the leader’s historical life and illuminates a key element of the leader’s spiritual teachings. For instance, you might describe the moment when the Buddha confronts Mara under the Bodhi Tree. Or you might write about Moses leading his people out of Egypt. Or you might tell the story of Jesus getting his feet washed by Mary, the sister of Lazarus. Or you could describe the scene when Mohammed is visited by Gabriel for the first time. Your scene must include character description, setting details, dialog, action, dramatic tension/conflict, and resolution. You should also include quotations from sacred texts in your narrative. See the mini-model below for inspiration.

The Buddha Takes a Bath

A beautiful girl, whose name Gautama could not remember, giggled as she stroked his back with a sponge. Another young woman strummed a harp in the distance. More servants waited outside the baths to provide every comfort to the young prince.

Gautama knew that later, after his bath, he would most likely lie in a hammock while lovely maidens fanned him with palm fronds, and he drifted off into a dreamless sleep. The harp music would follow him into his slumber and summon him back out of it eventually so that he might enjoy yet another royal feast.

This had been Gautama’s life for as long as he could remember. He had never set foot outside the palace and had been provided for in every way imaginable throughout his entire life. He wanted for nothing.

Yet somehow, something was still missing. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but a longing had begun to grow inside him that consumed his every waking moment, even if he could not name it. And now, here in the royal baths with the harp fluttering nearby, he decided he could take it no longer!

He suddenly cast off the girl with the sponge and splashed out of the bath. A servant hastily wrapped him in a velvet cloak so that he would not catch a chill.

Quickly, before he could lose his courage, young Gautama strode out of the royal baths, past the hammock that was waiting for him, past the servants who were eager to serve, and straight to his father’s chambers.
Without knocking, he entered and blurted out, “Father, I want to leave the palace.”

The king had known this day was coming. He had seen it in his son’s eyes for some time now. No palace of delights could contain the boy forever. Just as he had been warned by the prophets, the king knew he would have to let his son go. This young, inquisitive prince was destined to rule over a much bigger kingdom than the one his father could offer him.

Of course, Prince Gautama had no idea then just how much agony he was about to encounter outside the palace walls. Nor did he know that he would eventually devote his life to quelling the anguish of his fellow humans. Nor did he know that he would ultimately discover “the middle way.” His journey was just beginning.

And so on...

Grading Criteria

Your narrative must do all of the following:

_____ include character description;

_____ incorporate setting details;

_____ utilize dialog;

_____ center on specific actions;

_____ create dramatic tension/conflict;

_____ be inspired by a story about the historical figure’s life;

_____ capture the essence of a key spiritual teaching;

_____ incorporate quotations from a spiritual text;

_____ be at least three-five typed pages double spaced;

_____ be carefully proofread and copyedited.

Grade = _______
What is the Value of Art?

A Found Poem

Closely examine one well-known work of art. Do a little research about the artwork, using basic encyclopedia sources. Pull words, phrases, and sentences from these sources and arrange them into a poem, incorporating imagery, figurative language, rhythm, and dramatic line breaks. You may also include words, phrases, and sentences of your own, and you may have to rephrase the lines you’ve found from encyclopedias to meet the poetic requirements of this assignment. See the model below for inspiration.

From the Foam

(A Found Poem on Botticelli’s Venus)

When a young Titan
lops off his father's genitals
and hurls them into the sea,
the blood and semen
churn into salty froth.
There Venus rises
from the foam
perched seductively
upon her clam shell.

Is she
A sultry siren of the earth
who arouses our unseemly lust?
Or is she
a goddess from the heavens
who lights the way
to the spirit?

If any woman could do it,
she could.

She emerges from the sea
upon her shell,
nudged from the shore
by the breath of the gods
in a cascade of roses.

She lifts our minds
towards the godly
to the realm of divine love.

A Nymph reaches out
to drape her with a cloak.
The voluptuous nude,
a sign of the surging spring,
stands still
but is always in motion--
the leaves of the trees
waving in the background,
the torrent of her hair
blown by the Zephyrs,
the roses floating behind,
the waves gently breaking,
her cloak lifted by the breeze.

She may have been born from
a tempest of blood and gore,
but this Venus
is the salty gateway to
our windswept souls.

Bibliography

“Birth of Venus.” artble.com
“Venus.” newworldencyclopedia.org
“Venus.” wikipedia.com
“Venus Mythology.” crystalinks.com

Grading Criteria

Your poem must do all of the following:

______ incorporate imagery;
______ utilize figurative language;
______ employ dramatic line breaks;
______ contain rhythmic repetition;
______ offer a relevant interpretation of the artwork’s thematic significance;
______ include a title and a simple bibliography.

Grade = _______
What is the Purpose of Education?
A Letter from the Past

Select an author whose work we have read, and write a persuasive letter from that author to a contemporary political figure. For instance, you might want to write a letter from Marcus Aurelius to Barrack Obama. Or you might try writing a letter from Plato to Jeb Bush. Or you could tackle a letter from Machiavelli to Hillary Clinton. Your letter must illuminate the philosophy of its author. It must also attempt to persuade its receiver to do (or not do) something specific. You should incorporate relevant quotations in the letter and provide contextualized explanations of each quote. See the mini-model below for inspiration.

A Letter from Immanuel Kant to Arnie Duncan, Secretary of Education

Dear Arnie,

I have watched in silence for too long while you and your shortsighted counterparts have advanced your “Race to the Top” agenda—an agenda that defies logic and all but ensures that the majority will forever remain unenlightened.

By transforming the art of education into a quantifiable, data-driven, accountability-obsessed, test-centered endeavor, you have essentially stripped humanity of its holy obligation to seek intellectual enlightenment. I understand that your job requires you to provide some sort of concrete evidence of academic success, “But to resign from enlightenment… (is) to trample underfoot the sacred rights of mankind.”

You must not allow the “minority” to turn young people into slaves of the economy. The youthful must be allowed (or rather expected) to question the rationale of society’s “guardians.” How can they ever learn to do this if all of the questions they encounter have only one correct answer? How can they ever seek their sacred right if all they know are comma rules and math equations? How can a great society like yours advance if its people are too ignorant to contemplate larger questions that defy simple answers? Why are you demanding that they be taught what to think when they should be taught how to think?

It is with all of this in mind that I am writing to urge you to stop the madness!

And so on...

Bibliography

Kant, Immanuel. “What is Enlightenment?”
Grading Criteria

Your letter must do all of the following:

_____ accurately depict the viewpoint of an author we have studied;
_____ employ persuasive argumentation;
_____ focus on one specific goal;
_____ incorporate relevant quotations from the readings;
_____ provide contextualized explanation of how the quotes relate;
_____ be carefully proofread and copyedited;
_____ be at least two pages;
_____ include a simple bibliography.

Grade = _____

__________________________________________________________________________

Teacher Comments:
What do Politics and Art Have in Common?
An Expository Assignment

Examine a period in art history that we have studied and find connections between the philosophy of the art movement and a political theory. For example, you might want to argue that if not for Marx, Andy Warhol would never have found his vision. Or you might insist that Thomas Hobbes would have loved the art of the High Renaissance. Or you might suggest that John Locke paved the way for the post-modern minimalists. Your essay must include a detailed explanation and analysis of the art period you intend to examine. It must also offer a thorough examination of a political theory. You will be expected to find and explain the connections you see between these two movements. You must also provide ample evidence to support your claims. Finally, this essay must be written in MLA format and it must include a proper Works Cited page. See the attached sample essay for inspiration.

Grading Criteria

Your essay must do all of the following:

_____ include a detailed explanation and analysis of an art movement;

_____ offer a thorough examination of a political theory:

_____ provide and explain the relevant connections between these two concepts;

_____ provide ample evidence to support your claims;

_____ be written in MLA format with proper internal citations and Works Cited page;

_____ be carefully proofread and copyedited.

_____ be at least 8-10 pages double spaced.

Grade = ______

__________________________________________________________________________________

Teacher Comments:
Drink My Piss: Locke’s Liberalism & Duchamp’s Dadaism

Since making visual art has always been a political act, it is not a stretch to argue that politics and political philosophy have inspired countless movements in the art world. One obvious example would be the political power enjoyed by the Roman Catholic Church during the Renaissance and how it “inspired,” through commissions, the works of Michelangelo, Raphael, and Leonardo DiVinci, just to name a few. Artists cannot help but be influenced by the political realities of the world around them. Often their work is a commentary on, or an acquiescence to, the political backdrop in front of which they find themselves living and working. What might be less obvious, however, is the way in which political philosophies of the past have informed modern and post-modern art. For instance, it might be fair to say that Baroque political philosophy has had a profound impact on the art of the 20th century.

It might be argued, for instance, that Thomas Hobbes’ Machiavellian attitude toward a “common power” that keeps men “in awe” is the idea that planted the seed that one day, over three hundred years later, finally blossomed into the idol-worshipping pop art of Andy Warhol (Matthews 127). This may seem like a bit of a stretch perhaps, but no one can deny that both Hobbes and Warhol believed in the
absolute power of kings, though Hobbes’ version went by the name of Charles, and Warhol’s was called Marilyn.

One might similarly conclude that Francis Bacon’s “inductive inquiry” gave birth to the spontaneous paint dribbles of Jackson Pollock’s version of abstract expressionism (121). It may well be that if not for Bacon’s application of the scientific method, Pollock may never have hypothesized about or experimented with his radically alternative approach to the application of paint. Or perhaps more likely, his work would not have been accepted by his contemporaries if Bacon had not laid the foundation for admiration of experimentation three centuries earlier.

Likewise, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to imagine Dadaist Marcel Duchamp hanging a urinal on a gallery wall in 1917 (calling it “Fountain”) if not for his having been given permission to do so by John Locke in 1690. In fact, if not for Locke’s Liberalism, Duchamp’s Dadaism probably would never have been born in that disillusioned era between the wars. Dada’s frustration with reason, as it was used to justify war, as well as the Dadaists’ disgust with the esthetics overvalued by the art community, are what led Duchamp and others involved in the short-lived movement to radically undermine reason and esthetics in their artwork (Rubin 9). But if John Locke had not personally proclaimed man’s right to revolt in The Second Treatise of Civil Government, Marcel Duchamp would never have gotten away with essentially inviting the art world to drink his urine.

John Locke’s principle contribution to political theory was to advocate the dissolution of governments that do not protect the rights of their citizens. Such citizens, Locke believed, were not “bound to obey” the government’s authority, and
were in fact, obligated to overthrow the arbitrary power that had, in effect, declared war with (its) people” (Matthews 130, 132). He decried men who were willing to subject themselves “to the dominion and control” of an unfair government, saying that when a government’s actions “extend farther than the common good,” it should be “dissolved from within” (129, 130). Tyrannical leaders commit a “breech of trust,” according to Locke, and he said, “they forfeit the power the people had put into their hands,” giving the people “a right to resume their original liberty” whereby they “act as supreme, and continue the legislative in themselves, or place it in a new form, or new hands” (132, 133).

Locke’s argument not only supported the right to revolution, it also insisted that such revolution was in the best interest of humanity. “The end of government is the good of mankind;” he said, “and which is best for mankind, that the people should always be exposed to the boundless will of tyranny, or that the rulers should be sometimes liable to be opposed when they grow exorbitant in the use of their power” (133)? In this way, Locke inspired a new world order, one that gave rise to Jeffersonian democracy, Marxist communism, and eventually, Duchamp’s Dadaism.

In fact, many German Dadaists embraced Marxist philosophy and directly associated themselves with communism. Believing that “bourgeois society in Europe was irremediably corrupt,” these Dadaists sought to “subvert modern bourgeois society.” They wished that man would no longer “be measured (by)...bourgeois morality and nationalism” (Rubin 10). According to Hugo Ball, “The Dadaists were fighting against the agony of the times” (9).
Born on the dawn of World War I, Dada was not so much an art movement as it was a movement of disgust (9). The men who would become the ushers of the Dada art movement were primarily enraged by what they saw as the “bankruptcy of rationalism”—the logic used to justify mass murder. If nothing else, Dada was surely “a reaction to the intense disappointments that young men of the wartime generation experienced” (9). These young men wanted to “shed responsibility for the horror of a world that considered war something natural” (10). Their goal was to “break free or splinter from the paternal forces with which they no longer shared values” (10).

The word Dada in French means “a child’s hobbyhorse.” In English it means “an infantile sound” (9). When examining the art that emerged from the movement, it is clear that these artists were offering “a willful rejection of the inherited world of adult values” (9). But while it was often childlike and playful, “the ideal dada act was a paradoxical, spontaneous gesture aimed at revealing the inconsistency and inanity of conventional beliefs” (11).

Like others who embraced Dada, Marcel Duchamp “liberated himself from the esthetic tradition,” which he saw as “the main premise of modern art” (9, 14). Prior to 1860, paint was the most revered medium, and its role was to serve religion, ethics, government, and history with realistic, recognizable images (14). In contrast, Duchamp’s work in the early part of the 20th century deviated from this dominant medium and subject matter because they did not serve his ultimate purpose. “I was interested in ideas—not merely visual products,” he said (14). In
this way, Duchamp helped lead an artistically political revolt that might well have pleased John Locke.

The Dada period is sometimes called an era of “creative anarchy” (9). In addition to rejecting the rationality used to sell war, Dadaists also sought to discover “an unreasoned order” in art that was not governed by the rules of esthetics, which had been accepted by modern artists (10). Duchamp in particular is considered the “inventor of anti-art” because “he rejected the techniques and attitudes associated with picture making” (16). His contributions were an all-out assault on the esthetic values of the art world. This attack on the artistic community was the natural outgrowth of Duchamp’s dissatisfaction with the political leaders who built war machines and called it logical to do so. Duchamp despised anything associated with conventional values in politics and art, and it was his fervent desire to destroy those values.

Among Duchamp’s most notable contributions to his legendary attack on high art was his bearded and mustached reproduction of the Mona Lisa. By “defacing” Da Vinci’s classic painting, Duchamp “cast doubt on the accepted definition of art” (37). And as if the beard and mustache were not irreverent enough, Duchamp even went so far as to label the vandalized reproduction with the letters L.H.O.O.Q., which roughly translates to “She has hot pants” (37). Duchamp’s Mona Lisa clearly ridiculed esthetic values and illustrated his insistence that the object itself was not to be valued as highly as the idea that inspired it (16).

Perhaps Duchamp’s greatest contribution to the Dada revolution was something he called “readymades.” These were “man-designed, commercially
produced, utilitarian objects endowed with the status of anti-art by Duchamp’s selection and titling of them” (36). “The choice of readymades was never dictated by an esthetic delectation,” Duchamp claimed. “The choice,” he said, “was based on a reaction of visual indifference” (37). Having abandoned paint and the realistic representation of esthetically pleasing objects, Duchamp became obsessed with the objects themselves, which became art, or anti-art, simply by being identified as such by Duchamp.

The most infamous of Duchamp’s readymades include “Bicycle Wheel” (1913) and the aforementioned “Fountain.” The former of these was a bicycle wheel mounted on a stool. By juxtaposing these two incongruent objects, Duchamp hoped to create what he considered a visual “displacement” or “disassociation,” thus liberating potential hidden meanings that he had not intended, but that the viewer might invent (36). It is difficult, however, to believe that the urinal Duchamp called “Fountain” was truly a random selection. Considering his disdain for the world of modern art, this particular object and its title most likely had a more sinister purpose than “Bicycle Wheel,” though it was probably no more or less effective in jarring the art establishment that came to the galleries in search of oil landscapes and portraits.

Equally unsettling must have been what Duchamp called his “verbal readymades.” These were the “unexpected juxtaposition of hybrid phrases”—“words and phrases removed from context and joined together in logic-defying patterns,” chosen for auditory similarities to create “ambiguous, multi-level meanings” (36). Verbal readymades like “In Advance of Broken Arm” and “Why Not
“Sneeze” not only provided obscure titles for his visual readymades, they might have also absolved Beat writers like Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg of their conventional literary responsibilities some fifty years later. But beyond inspiring other artists, and perhaps writers, to challenge the authority of the establishment, what did Duchamp and Dada actually accomplish? What would Locke have said about the success or failure of this “revolution”?

By the end of World War II, Dada was dead. Its function between the wars as a critique of conventional wisdom had lost its bite. “When Dada action stopped seeming really subversive, when Dadaists ceased being really dangerous radicals and began to be thought of as naughty boys, the end of the movement was at hand” (11). In effect, the Dadaist absurdity became merely entertaining and no longer threatened the establishment; thus, Dada had no hope of destroying a warmongering rationale when the warmongers, and those who had bought into their rationale, looked at the Dadaist rebels as nothing more than defiant children.

Indeed, Duchamp and the other Dadaists had failed to carry out the revolution John Locke had empowered them to lead. Locke had said that dissolution of government must lead to the erecting of a new government that would better serve the rights of the people (Matthews 132). Dada art does not appear to have paved the way for unrestricted artistic expression. Instead, it seems to have given rise to many new conventions that merely rebel and rebel again but never arrive at any ultimate truth. Though the abstract expressionists and the surrealists and the pop artists, who followed on the heels of Dada, owe an enormous debt to Duchamp and his contemporaries, they did not and do not represent the “unreasoned order”
Dada claims to have sought. And while Dadaism left a playfully destructive mark on the art world, it did nothing to alter man’s use of reason to justify war. In the end, given its lofty goals, Dada may have been little more than “an infantile sound” uttered by a handful of creative anarchists commenting on the “agony of their times” without any vision of how to establish what Locke might have called an institution that serves and protects its artists and its citizens at large.

On the other hand, assuming Dada wanted to achieve Locke’s coveted ends might be misguided. Perhaps Dada was a success precisely because it did not lead to anything. Perhaps this was its overriding goal all along. Still, wouldn’t be grand if one day an artist would come along who would shake us up so much that we actually did evolve into creatures that did not abide by arbitrary conventions and fraudulent logic? Unlikely, to be sure, but maybe today’s “comics journalists” like Joe Sacco, who create comic book-style graphic depictions of post-modern absurdities like the Iraq War, represent the next wave of artistic hope for humanity. Or maybe hope is one of those all-too-human conventions that is ultimately just as ridiculous as a bicycle wheel spinning sleepily on the seat of a metal stool.
Works Cited


Required Assignment

Designing Assessments That Cultivate Rigorous Creativity
(Arts of Teaching Series)
Mark Maxwell

What are the steps to creating an assessment that will require students to think creatively?

1) Identify a text you are likely to teach. Select something challenging and provocative.

2) Read and annotate the text to identify key elements you will want your students to grasp. Questions to consider as you annotate: What do you want your students to take away from their encounter with this text? What ideas do you want them to wrestle with when they read this text and respond to it? What preconceived notions might they bring to this text? How might the text alter their thinking about the subject matter? What elements of the text should inspire awe? What elements might inspire critical analysis? Does the text pose an inherent or explicit problem that requires a solution?

3) Design an assessment that will lead your students to the “key elements” you have identified. (An effective assessment is also a teaching tool.) The assessment must require some sort of response to a prompt—written, oral, or media-driven. Resist the temptation to fall back on a traditional expository assessment. Ask your students to do something that will take them out of their comfort zone by requiring them to respond to the text in a creative way. Consider, for instance, asking students to explore multiple writing genres—dialog, narrative, poem, letter, speech, etc. Remember to begin your prompt with a question that will inspire curiosity, a question that has more than one possible answer, a question that is difficult to address without digging deeply into the text. (Your question should require that students re-read the text for a better understanding.) The prompt should provide step-by-step instructions for the students so they know exactly what is expected of them.

4) Respond to your own prompt to create a model and to test the effectiveness of the prompt. Your response should address the prompt and make use of the rhetorical tools you want your students to practice. Avoid the impulse to provide a definitive response to the prompt; you don’t want students to be intimidated by the model, and you don’t want the model to cause students to simply imitate your work.

5) Create a checklist (which can also serve as a grade sheet) that identifies all of your expectations. Your checklist should have no fewer than five expectations and no more than ten. Make sure the list is direct and explicit and clear. Students should feel confident that their response will exhibit evidence of successfully meeting the criteria.
*For examples of assignments, models, and grade sheets refer to the packet "Cultivating Rigorous Creativity" available on the Craft of Teaching website.

Assessments That Cultivate Rigorous Creativity
Art of Teaching Workshop

Assessment Checklist:

_____ prompt is attached to an annotated text;

_____ prompt poses an effective question;

_____ prompt includes detailed step-by-step instructions;

_____ prompt is attached to an effective model;

_____ prompt includes an effective checklist for grading purposes.

Maxwell/2014