Creativity in the Classroom - Part 1
The Creativity Crisis: What Are We Doing About This Mess? An Artist’s Response

by Patricia Barry

This is the first article in a new Instructional Leader six-part series on “Creativity in the Classroom.” Research shows that American education is experiencing a creativity crisis, one of inaction and non-productivity. Identified over a quarter of a century ago in the 1990s, this crisis is very real. Education’s lack of response to this situation is highly complicated, but a contributing factor is the vast majority of current educators who are 30-to-40+. These educators have never known anything but high stakes testing, and have never experienced education without the instruction-changing pressures of a multitude of state tests. Most grew up with TV and video games; they have always had the connectivity of devices and the Internet. Since research shows that educational institutions change at a snail’s pace, and “we tend to teach as we’ve been taught”, there are many challenges ahead in order to institute changes.

This series will review the crisis through cited research, explore viable national and educational programs to end the critical decline in creative skills, provide requirements for creativity-nurturing classroom environments, and offer interdisciplinary activities and teaching resources for their implementation.

“Creativity in the Classroom” is authored by passionate and involved educators, administrators, artists and business figures who believe that 25 years is too long to wait to stem the steady decline of creativity in young students. Our future educational, economic and entrepreneurial existence depends on action now.

E. Paul Torrance dedicated an entire lifetime to the study of the advancement of creativity in education. From the early 1950s, he faced stiff opposition about his calls for creativity to be explicitly taught. Creativity then was considered to be an immeasurable, natural ability. He advocated that creativity was skill-specific, requiring intentional instruction. Although that is still debated, his life’s work ultimately led to the development of the Torrance tests and gifted programs throughout the world. Research following the original 400 students in Torrance’s 1953 model showed a strong connection between childhood creativity and creative output as an adult. Torrance continued to track the original group of subjects, and to advocate work in creativity through the mid 1980s.

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A 2003 TED talk by Sir Ken Robinson on the creativity crisis reached more than 100 million viewers. The talk focuses on how our current school systems suppress creativity. He proposes that our current model leaves little room for divergent thinking.

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In a 2010 survey of 1,500 chief executives conducted by IBM’s Institute for Business Value, CEOs overwhelmingly identified creativity as the most important leadership competency for the successful enterprise of the future. These leaders repeated that complexity was the biggest challenge facing their companies and that creativity allows employees to navigate and capitalize on this complexity. Many business models now stress creativity and collaborative problem solving.

However, the creativity of our country’s children is not being sufficiently nurtured and
encouraged. A 2011 study carried out by The College of William & Mary, and researcher Kyung Hee Kim, indicated that creativity scores, based on the Torrance assessment index, have been steadily declining.

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The research suggests that the decline is particularly serious for younger children.

In her research with more than 300,000 participants in Torrance testing, Kim showed that elaboration, fluency and originality scores all began declining as early as 1984, with elaboration showing the earliest decline. The first full year after the initiation of the Texas Assessment of Basic Skills Test, or TABS Test, was 1984. Kim notes that, in parallel, scores from the Checklist of 13 Creative Strengths show creative attitudes have been decreasing continuously since 1990. Americans are less willing to accept creative thinking, less tolerant of differences, and less likely to try to find multiple answers to a question.

In American universities not much has changed since 1950, when the distinguished psychologist J. P. Guilford in his inaugural address as president of the American Psychological Association stated that education’s neglect of the subject of creativity was appalling. Adding to this sequence of events is the fact that textbooks are at least three years out of date when they are published, and educational systems are the slowest adopters of innovation. Thus, we see that educational institutions need a strong dose of creative problem solving.

“The only thing that interferes with my learning is my education.” -Albert Einstein

At the same time budgets for arts programs across the country are experiencing deep cuts. The diminishing focus on the arts is due to a combination of policies such as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which emphasizes standardized assessments; a trend toward narrower school curricula; and the lingering effects of the recession. The reduced class time for arts is also caused by a perception that the arts, while nice to have, are not essential.

The arts are, in fact, essential for what we as a nation desire for our children: academic achievement, social engagement and innovative thinking. According to a number of nationally recognized studies, participation in the arts improves problem-solving abilities and correlates to higher test scores. For example, a UCLA study showed that low-income children who participated in arts education had higher grades and higher attendance records than their peers who did not participate. Researchers who have explored the impact of arts activities on intelligence have found that children who participate in arts develop improved attention and focus, which then leads to expanded cognitive ability. Studies have also shown that arts-engaged children benefit from increased motivation and cooperation.

Educators, increasingly aware of the benefits of the arts, are beginning to advocate for a greater focus on the arts, but it will be years before most school systems shift the necessary time and resources toward an arts-rich curriculum.

But knowing what has possibly caused the decline in creativity—mass media, TV tots, computer obsessions, video mania, constant connectivity through them, and suspicions that this trend is further exacerbated by NCLB and states’ high-stakes testing—does nothing to stem the tide. Knowledge is only power if it is ACTED upon—and traditional education patterns historically change at a snail’s pace.

“Creativity is as important in education as literacy and we should treat it with the same status.” -Sir Ken Robinson

Head Start, Reading Is Fundamental, Early Reading First and Reading First are only a few of the multiplicity of government programs, national, state and local, that address early childhood literacy, adult, and family literacy involving thousands of learners yearly. How many parallel government programs for creativity are there—supporting, funding, researching and proving progress in the creative void? Few to none.

There are a few promising educational efforts across the U.S. showing steady results in the face of the 25-year decline. Most of the practice of creative methods, however, is being done outside the traditional educational institutions by consulting firms and by persons in companies who have been trained in creative problem solving methods.
Some small districts have instituted arts-infused curriculums surrounding the efforts of a passionate art teacher as a core leader. But what about all the hundreds, if not thousands, of districts that don’t have art teachers at the elementary levels? And with budgetary constraints, the arts are often the first place cuts are made.

The Creativity Crisis is not an event, but an era of continued decline in most measures of creativity. One of the barriers to improving creativity results from public demands for immediate and measurable solutions to everything—in education, in business and in government. In this exacting, hostile climate, we need creative solutions presented to reverse the trend. To increase the likelihood of this happening, there needs to be an open dialogue, nationally and internationally, so that truly creative solutions can be suggested, considered and implemented.

“The problems we face now, and in the future, simply demand that we do more than just hope for inspiration to strike.” Newsweek, The Creativity Crisis

We’ve Waited a Quarter of a Century; How Much Longer Can or Must We Wait? Everyartist Live!

A national initiative, Everyartist Live! envisioned by professional artist Brendan O’Connell and supported by passionate business partners and educators, is making a difference, and is a dynamic way to involve entire schools, districts, and even states, in direct actions to combat the Creativity Crisis. O’Connell, concerned by the lack of creative environments for his own children in which to be nurtured, came up with the idea to start a national program to push creativity in young, school-aged children through art-making.

The website, everyartist.me, states: “Everyartist is a social enterprise devoted to igniting the creativity innate in every child. We do this through our growing virtual community and art events. Our evolving technological platform will serve as a learning center, art exhibition platform and creativity space for young artists and their parents, teachers and mentors. It is being designed to feature art collaborations and creativity building exercises, while also supporting art events from small groups of local friends to global in reach. Our signature event, Everyartist Live!, is an annual kid’s creativity day that brings together young artists to ignite the imagination and spark original works around a common theme. Our purpose is simple: Spark Creativity.”

Each year a national lesson plan, written by an art educator(s) and aligned with the National Core Standards, is supplied with various teaching aids in the appendices. Therefore schools and/or districts that do not have art teachers have structured guidelines, support materials, multiple suggestions, and assistance with instituting Everyartist Live! in their curriculum.

In the planning or incubation stage of the lesson, the importance of fluency, flexibility (elaboration) and originality is stressed in the brainstorming phase. These three facets of thinking are hallmarks of the creative process, (see K. Kim’s research) and the suggestions for possible formats, connections and extensions encourage collaboration and interdisciplinary studies. When an entire school, in every discipline, concentrates its learning energies on one concept, great things happen. Learning makes sense, and an infectious enthusiasm for learning takes over. The annual event, scheduled

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The 2014 theme, My Favorite Story, saw participation expanded to 300,000+ students, in 46 states, and artworks dazzled with personal stories: funny, scary, poignant, embarrassing, hopeful, and uplifting works presented as postage stamps, movie posters, filmstrips, or story quilts filled walls and halls. As part of a collective experience, Everyartist Live! 2014 participants celebrated and played a role in breaking the World Record for the largest number of art pieces created on a single day (a record first set in 2013 by the same event.) Teachers or sponsors of each site’s event can easily upload photos of all student work to the everyartist.me website as additions to the international gallery maintained by the site.
On October 29, the 2015 event will focus on “What Fuels Your Creativity?” to get students to the heart of what makes each creative mind tick. Research shows that if students can define a trait, and have it expected, accepted, and respected by the school environment, then it is much more likely to be exhibited. This year’s plan also provides posters of the 4Cs of the 21st Century, mandated skills based on the arts-infused education leadership programs backed by Crayola and The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP). The posters feature Creativity, Critical Thinking, Communication and Collaboration, and the four components of each of those essential educational skills. A section on “Ask the Experts” features quotations on creativity from such great thinkers as Einstein, Edison and D. Escalante, a third-grader who is very passionate about creativity and participated in the last three years’ Everyartist Live! events.

In October 2014, during an early morning Channel 2 News live shoot, career educator and lifetime TEPSA and NAESP member, Principal Gale Parker of Lamkin Elementary School in Cypress-Fairbanks ISD (outside of Houston) was interviewed while Everyartist Live! founder Brendan O’Connell, parents, staff and students participated in a warm-up for the 2014 event. She stated, “Every student artist has a story to tell, and every one of these children is creative. It doesn’t matter where they are from, they all have a creative spark!”

“IT IS THE SUPREME ART OF THE TEACHER TO AWAKEN THE JOY IN CREATIVE EXPRESSION AND KNOWLEDGE.” -ALBERT EINSTEIN

Please plan for your school or organization to be part of the expected 450,000+ Everyartist Live! participants for this school year’s event on October 29 by signing up on everyartist.me. Be part of a national, concerted effort to confront and halt the decline in creativity. Take a stand...make a stand for creativity.

References
IBM 2010 Global CEO Study: Creativity Selected as Most Crucial Factor for Future Success.