

DISCOVERING THE CREATIVE IMPULSE

**An Approach to Teaching
Interrelated Arts**

Reports of Issues Related to Teaching Arts and Humanities

**Focus on the creative process
Studies relationships of dance, film, music
poetry, short stories, theatre,
and mixed media**

**Harold A. Popp
Wichita State University
School of Music
Wichita, KS 67260-0053
harold.popp@wichita.edu
316/978-6607
316/729-7450
Fax: 316/729-6785**

DISCOVERING THE CREATIVE IMPULSE

Harold A. Popp
Wichita State University
School of Music
Wichita, KS 67260-0053
harold.popp@wichita.edu

Abstract

The paper to be presented is categorized under the title: Reports on Issues Related to Teaching Arts and Humanities. Materials have been developed resultant of experience in teaching a general education course entitled Interrelated Arts. The primary goal of the course is **to assist individuals in discovering themselves as creative beings through the arts**. Areas of the arts studied include: dance, film, music, poetry, sculpture, short stories, theatre, and mixed media.

The initial theme serving as a focus in studying the interrelationships found in the arts is *Belief and the Arts*. Following introductory materials and discussion, emphasis is directed toward the creative process—as described by philosophers, psychologists, educators, and active creative artists (both current and historical).

This emphasis enables students to understand credos (statements of belief) on the part of creative artists. A final result of the class is evidenced with students developing their own credos of creative process as they reflect on awareness and evolution of individual creative promise.

Techniques, class presentations, reflective assignments, and open-ended discussions lie outside normal classroom procedures. Discussion is critical. Guest presenters from various facets of the arts, aesthetics, and representative cultures/belief systems are invited as resources, e.g., artists, performers, pedagogues.

DISCOVERY THE CREATIVE IMPULSE
Harold A. Popp

During the past several years, Wichita State University has offered an Issues & Perspectives course for general education entitled Interrelated Arts. The course emerges from interaction with the arts as essential to humanness, as unique in the human experience as a way of knowing, and as a way of being. Although the list of objectives in the syllabus gives a clear description of course intent, the underlying and primary goal of the course is **to assist individuals in discovering themselves as creative beings through the arts.**

The stated theme of the course is: *Belief and the Arts*. This theme serves as a focus to study the interrelationships found in the arts and humanities. As a vehicle, it provides direction and organization to the content of the course. Students become acquainted with belief statements from creative artists in the fields of dance, film, music, poetry, sculpture, short stories, theatre, and mixed media. These personal credos of professionals engaged in their art can stimulate thoughtful changes in students' own response to the arts.

Students enrolling in the course vary widely in their majors and backgrounds. A typical class population may include an international business student from Nigeria, an aerospace major from Saudi Arabia, a nurse's aide, and majors from the various arts domains. Each brings a different set of background experiences and expectations to the class. This necessitates a flexibility on the part of the instructor in giving direction to an evolving class personality. Avenues must be established to capitalize on the uniqueness of each individual class.

Basically, an atmosphere of total acceptance for ideas is established immediately. The classroom environment must be one void of threat, fear, and possibility of 'wrong answers.' Students enter the course with an 'A' grade. None of the assignments, tests (which are all take-home essay questions), or the

final project will have grade markings, although extensive written comments and questions are provided

If any student wishes to know where their grade stands at any time throughout the course, they can refer to

the instructor's grade book. In a class with an emphasis on discussion/sharing, it is critical to create a setting in which everyone's response is valid. Without that common acceptance, integrity is jeopardized, and students tend to revert to "traditional/pre-established" responses. Never are there evaluative statements, such as "That is bad art," "This is my favorite piece," or "This is one of the greatest....."

Such value judgments lead to students' questioning their own responses, which tends to destroy a positive,

free-wheeling discussion, in which they can allow themselves a degree of vulnerability.

The instructor must be prepared to "go with the flow" in any direction, at any time. He/she must be "over-prepared" for each session. One class period may use a wide variety of techniques: Socratic dialogue, demonstration, question/answers, but most important—discussion. Another class period may be primarily committed to viewing, reading, or listening to works of art.

Each period can start with the introduction of an artwork: painting, music, sculpture, video clip. For example, at the second class period, students are asked to respond to a Jackson Pollack painting with a

one word description; responses have included: chaotic, energy, vitality, surge, perpetual, mess, life-giving.

An Oscar Peterson recording of *West Side Story* may illicit a reaction of excitement, confusion during improvisation, interest in what happens during improvisation, comparison with the original Bernstein music—even a reason to study the form. When artworks themselves provoke the responses, creating reasons for exploration and understanding becomes relatively easy. On the other hand, trying to answer questions that are not asked is one of the most inefficient practices in education AND one of the most common. Fortunately, that does not have to be the case with the arts. Even in a classroom setting, the arts are alive—a vital and intrinsic part of our being.

There is a tendency in our culture, however, to compartmentalize information, to specialize, to fragment, and to place learning in "little boxes" (as Pete Seeger implied in a song entitled "Little Boxes")

from the 1950s). Indeed, achievement in such learning processes is akin to the story in which the operation

is a success, but the patient dies. Educational institutions too often make curricular decisions which lead to

the same unfortunate practices. Rarely (outside of a senior or graduate seminar) is there serious attention focused on synthesizing or drawing together those related elements which may be considered essential to humanness. Yet to that precise extent, the arts are among the most powerful, most compelling, and most glorious manifestations of every cultural heritage. Our students deserve the opportunity to explore, question, mature, and become aware of their own creative potential in whichever realm they discover the truth of reality.

For this to occur, particular emphasis must be placed on studying the elements of the creative process. Students, in other words, must have the opportunity to identify with creative minds within the domains of their particular interest. By researching creative individuals, students often are encouraged to examine personal gifts and characteristics of their own—heretofore unrealized.

The study of the creative process must be extensive. It needs to include the widest possible array of creative minds, and should be accompanied by artworks from those individuals. Involving the students in researching artists and sharing that research helps to create a forum for discussion. Often, the discussion reaches beyond a specific artist into areas of exploration that “grow” from the inside. Such depth may be difficult to attain with a technique which seems to “impose” from the outside.

At the conclusion of studying and exploration, students are better able to develop their individual definitions of creativity and the creative process. Whether students want to share these, or if such definitions need to remain anonymous, the thought process can stimulate excellent discussion.

Sample definitions of the creative process which class members have written after studying the creative process include the following:

1. The creative process is an essential drive within the human mind, spirit, and subconscious which results in tangible art that appeals to our senses, whether a visual, auditory, or tactile experience. Art is necessary to perpetuate history and culture; it is a means of communicating

ideas of a multicultural society through various media. Creativity fosters perceptual awareness, cognitive processes, aesthetic literacy, and life coping skills. Additionally, involvement in the creative process promotes a stronger understanding of oneself.

2. The creative process to me is a vision. This vision is quite different from person to person. I believe that each person in society has the ability to create something that can contribute to the meaning and enrichment of their own lives, as well as the lives of others. The success in the creative endeavor does not concern me. Although success is achieved through the great creators, I believe that creating should be something not out of glorification. Instead, I think that the most important gain from creation is the satisfaction of creating something that one can call his/her own. The creative process allows men and women to express themselves outwardly. We all have something to say. We as humans should recognize this and outwardly express ourselves, regardless of how the "art and music world" or anyone else sees it.

3. The creative process is not for the faint of heart. Determination, perseverance, and acceptance are needed to travel from a small idea to the final product. The conscious mind must be willing to accept the ideas that flow from the subconscious and to work this idea thoroughly from all possible angles. People must realize that the path from the initial idea to the final product is never straight, but may have many twists and turns, or even road blocks. Sometimes one might have to back up and try another path to see the idea to fruition. The spirit must be able to endure the twists and turns, and be accepting to even go against the "norm." Although the creative journey may be filled with tense or anxious moments, it is a journey always worth taking.

4. To me, the creative process begins when I sit in absolute silence—for a moment in time I block out the world around me and listen to the quietness from within, that part of me that belongs to me, and only me—my soul. A teacher once told me, "You only possess that which you cannot lose in a shipwreck," and after a moment of thought, I realized that he was referring to our souls. The soul is the simplest element within every human being. Within it, we are all equals, but not one of us is the same. It is from here that my creative energy flows. I have been given a body, an education, and many other physical gifts as tools to express the creativity from within. My music is an extension of my soul. Creativity is the essence of the soul in every individual.

5. I start with the major concept, always the concept. After the idea has been pounded into my head, I let the physical take over. Piece after piece the concept becomes apparent. This is when deconstruction is necessary. I tear at the piece until the unneeded additives are gone. You must give the viewer a challenge. Don't paint the picture in your head or the pot shape in your mind. Create the very basis for the concept and you have succeeded. Then, break it apart and do it again. When I see my personality in the piece, I know I'm getting close. Trust the hand and the eye and the constructs. Know the concept.

6. My performances only feel complete when the music has become a part of me; when it has intertwined itself with a piece of my soul which it carries out to the audience with it during a performance. A piece of music can only gain this closeness to my personal self through time. After gaining a concept of any piece through outside sources the concept must live within me, growing and conforming to the person within me. Only after the music has been played several times in between moments of simply living inside of me, does it feel as though it has arrived as a musical window to my innermost self. This musical window is why I believe we have music—to express passions and emotions deep inside of us that are nestled so deeply within us, we don't even know they are there, until the music draws them out.

Inviting guests to the class who are artists, critics, aestheticians or representatives of other cultures/belief systems can also have immeasurable impact on an interrelated arts class. Their presence banishes the idea that creativity is something that goes on “out there” somewhere and is engaged in only by creative minds who are recognizable through their masterpieces. Any course can benefit from award-winning authors, musicians, playwrights, or performers who teach on campus. Personal contact with such individuals in the setting established for the class is invaluable. Interdisciplinary activity cannot reach its full potential without the sort of environment where students can directly experience the arts as an essential way of knowing and a personal way of being.

Studying the various styles of creative artists is necessary to any course in the arts and humanities, but even more importantly, it can provide students with a basis for developing their own creative personalities. “Style” derives ultimately from characteristics and attitudes that express reality as an artist conceives it. Students are generally enthused by the process of insightful examination that results in understanding the integrity of a personal style. Considering style as an artistic thumbprint can guide students through the process of understanding themselves more fully in the search to discover their personal creative expression. Judicious prompting from an instructor can assist with that discovery.

The act of broadening a viewpoint by encounter with artworks can stimulate thought processes for the students. At times, this involves focusing on a single concept, and other instances underscore the importance of interdisciplinarity of the arts. Of the numerous explorations used in class, I have chosen three that have been successful.

1. When discussing a poem such as “Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening” by Robert Frost, there are the commonly acknowledged elements of an interlocking rhyme scheme unique to the poem; the first and last verses are the essential ones to the poem, while the middle two verses serve more as ‘filler’ material. The issue of intent should be considered; Frost did not ‘intend’ for this to be a poem with reference to death, as is commonly taught. After studying the poem and its elements, ask a question that ‘blind-sides’ the student—redirects their awareness from unanticipated directions—but which prompts them to think of a totally different dimension than usually perceived. Ask, “How many of you saw this poem in black and white? How many saw this poem in color?” The discussion that generally ensues holds a depth far beyond the normal treatment of the poem. In fact, similar unexpected questions asked during consideration of artworks commonly

encourage students to probe beyond the ordinary—search for facets of meaning not included in traditional approaches to artworks. Students become conditioned in taking the initiative to ferret out ways of understanding art that may be half-truths, but are nonetheless valid in the art enterprise.

2. Focusing on a mixed medium artwork enables a plethora of avenues to be explored. Stravinsky and Cocteau chose *Oedipus Rex* for a music theatre work for several reasons. These stemmed from the aesthetic dynamics in Paris during the 1920s, Stravinsky's distrust of 19th century *Ausdrucksmusik*, and the desire to choose a subject both well-known and venerable. It was not to be a plot set to music in Freudian terms, but approached from a set of feelings not requiring either realism nor romanticized sentimentality. This setting is a vehicle for understanding prevailing thought, artistic intent, and effective collaboration in the performing arts.

The plot unfolds as workings of the wheels of fate, tied together through the narrator. Cocteau's French text was translated into Latin, which as a dead language Stravinsky felt was devoid of all triviality. The language is not intended to be direct communication, but a posturing of the performers involved. A study of the text as compared to the original drama reflects the thinking of Stravinsky and Cocteau and should occur prior to viewing the excellent video conducted by Sergei Ozawa. In that performance, opportunities abound to discuss the use of staging, the masks worn on top of the heads, the over-sized hands, and the blocking and movements of the performers as they relate to subject and medium.

After viewing the performance video and any ensuing discussion, the experience of watching the 6th lecture in the Bernstein Norton Lectures "The Unanswered Question" provides an insight into the creation of the work that is rare. The entire event of study, performance, analysis, and discussion can draw students into a fuller awareness of the creative process and the interrelatedness of art elements.

3. Another activity in interdisciplinarity of the arts that is commonly employed is that of comparing works; they may involve works by the same arts, by different artist, differing schools of artistic thought, or even different eras. In the 1820s, Ludwig van Beethoven (totally deaf at the time) composed what he felt was his greatest work, *Missa Solemnis*. The "Credo" of the work is a setting of the Nicene Creed for soloists, chorus, and orchestra. Extensive analyses of the work are available.

In the 20th century, Leonard Bernstein was asked to write the dedicatory work for the opening of the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. by President Kennedy's widow. The result was his *Mass*. As a conductor, he had performed Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* numerous times. As a composer, he chose the same text for the "Credo" section of his mixed media work. Obviously, the alternating of rock singers with the electronic chanting of the creed in Latin and the theatrical production varies significantly from the concert setting by Beethoven.

The reasons for each of the works to be written presents excellent 'fodder' for discussion. Purpose or intent in each is certainly important. Events surrounding the creation of both works can contribute to a broad spectrum of issues, as can the artistic philosophies of the two creators. The use of Latin in the Beethoven and the mixture of Latin and the modern setting in English of the Bernstein presents opportunity for interpretation. Study of the intrinsic or formalist elements of both works provides opportunity to plumb depths of artistic awareness.

These activities and approaches represent only a few of the many possible ways to teach a course

in the arts and humanities. And this paper does not suggest a “by the number” methodology. I believe that

tying a course to a particular approach would defeat the ultimate reason for its existence. All individuals have something to say creatively, yet the majority of individuals never have an opportunity to realize that potential. This has long been a crisis in our profession, with too limited credence given to its significance.

I feel strongly that courses in the arts and humanities, call them interrelated or interdisciplinary, are

not only valuable, but of inestimable importance in creating the future of our society.