

Living and Learning with Paradox: A Creativity Project for Students

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CREATIVITY: A PERSPECTIVE

As a high school teacher, I have sifted and wandered through days, years, and piles of work, and yet have really only come to one (and solely one) bottom-line theory that offers an answer to that stubbornly perennial question of questions: *what exactly is it that I “do” every day with my students?* The answer, mind you, is not a word, a practice, a routine, or even an image of what might be happening in “my” Room 120 between 8:30 A.M. and 3:18 P.M. on any given weekday. The answer is only a theory, and a loose one at that, not to mention unoriginal, and by some en vogue standards, decidedly passé. Nonetheless, it is the one theory that I can apply to the ever-demanding work that engages me with my young students, and the one theory to which I can earnestly nod, and think to myself, “*Yeah. It’s got to be something like that.*” The theory? (*drum roll...or not*):

Paradox is everywhere.

PARADOX, as in the we-are-forever-drifting-spiralling-and-tripping-between-over-around-the-unpinned-poles-of-it-all variety. Or, if you prefer the hardbound definition: the presence of qualities in our lives that would *seem* to be self-contradictory or mutually exclusive, but in actuality are *not*. And yes, if you haven’t invested in this theory yet, then you, too, can buy your own *big ‘ol* piece of the “P” word—ten cents will get you around a hundred pounds (or fill your own contemplative wheelbarrow...the rate is just about that flat). In our profession, it seems the truest gold always comes cheap. That word again—paradox.

So what is it that’s so grand about this take-it-all theory, then? What makes it all that it is—as precious to some of us as that very soil that feeds us, and yet cheaper than the schoolyard dirt upon which we daily slog and trod, and to one day (it often feels) we will likely return? Simply put, the theory that paradox is everywhere works for me because in my classroom we celebrate diversity, and that celebration includes the diversity of responses that students invariably have to my instruction, *and* the diversity of what they themselves bring, on their own, to the class. Even when we—both they and I—do not expect to encounter a new idea, or a new way of looking at or understanding what we have before us, someone inevitably throws in a response or experience that opens our class to something new: sometimes an idea, or a novel perspective, sometimes the humor or sadness that was theretofore hidden. As such, we all take turns feeling like the left fielder. Utterances like, “Look what I did!” or “Really, it just came to me like that,” or even “No, no, no—*this* is the way *I* see it,” define and dignify what we do together in *our* Room 120 each day. When a student says one of these things to me, she answers that perennial question, and she does it without making sense, per se, of anything real, without

numbering our objectives, and without putting the final arrows in any grand scheme flowchart.

As an aside, I hope this take on paradox theory doesn't offend any science or math teachers by seeming to apply only to literature, art, or history classes; it shouldn't. After all, chaos theory is paradox's closest relative, and the nasty secret of numbers is well out in the open: the world knows that numbers might make you rich, they might even save your life, and they'll certainly put your child to sleep, but they'll never tuck him in like you do, and they really *don't* smile back, or much less wink. But still, we never will say goodbye to our numbers. Besides, how many games can we play sans the numbers? Sounds a bit like paradox, doesn't it?

The bigger and wider paradox goes something like this: there are some 136 objectives that my students are to "master" (the word is so heavy!) between August and May. That means that there are 136 relatively permanent increases in skills, knowledge, or behavior that I am somehow to impart to my kids in the nine and a half months that our lives intersect, and presumably, since most of them have not been in this class before, the majority of these skills, knowledge, and behaviors will be at the very least foreign to them, if not downright offensive and repugnant. [the familiar echo of student cheer: "*Compound-complex sentence! Mister, I'd rather have my teeth pulled.*"]

And with this big-enough-already paradox of our "objectives" before us, the fuller paradox only begins. Add to the scenario that I am to create an intersection, too, of space and time (i.e. Room 120, 10:35 to 11:29), where they will actually *want* to acquire these 136 relatively permanent increases in skills, knowledge, or behavior. So the paradox continues. Yes, I do want *them* to learn—that is, *to be the ones learning and doing*—and yet *I* must be the one to teach them. And yes, I want them to see things they have not yet seen, and yet I must provide the focused objects for their wandering vision. I want them to sing in their own voices, and yet I must first give them music. I want them to hear, and yet I must provide them with the stillness in which to listen. I want them to know things *for themselves*, and yet I must share them, too. I want them to go it alone, and to make it, and to know that they have made it, and yet I am there so that they will *not* have a back (perhaps yet another) turned to them. And *oh*, how I want them to write a poem or a story, or to sketch the way they see some piece of the world that they have come to own, and yet I must promise that it can be done, even when *they* are the ones who hold the truth already—that they *have never done this before*, and we really have no way to know if it will work or not, now do we?

I can tell you with certainty that I enter a world of paradox every time I step foot into my classroom. And at home, I can look at myself in the bathroom mirror each night and think about the complexities of all the expectations, needs, accomplishments, and doubts that all these paradoxes imply, and the word that sums it all up is "*du-uuh?*" I am no longer embarrassed, though, when the dog hears me say this out loud. Her look merely says to me, "You must be catching on, oh my wise, yet slow, teacherly-one."

Paradox. Paradox, indeed.

WHERE PARADOX MEETS CREATIVITY: SOME CRITICAL QUESTIONS

- What does it mean (specifically) for students to “be creative”?
- How necessary is a teacher’s presence in order for students to “be creative”?
- Is modeling (by a teacher, or others) necessary, or is it perhaps antithetical, to students’ creativity?
- Has the ability to “be creative” become a recycled version of predestination, in which we are apt to believe that some kids just have it, and others just don’t?
- Are space and time parameters—the “where” and “when”—critical to creativity?
- Does adolescence confound or abate the “where” and “when” issues of creativity?
- Can a teacher develop an accurate and constructive instrument with which to measure creative accomplishment (or even one that would not be outlawed for its Bradbury-esque or culturally “nepotistic” implications)?
- Does attempting to sponsor and promote creativity pose conflicts with current social or behavioral expectations in educational settings (is it potentially too dangerous to want our kids to be *that* creative, and at school, of all places)?
- Is creativity such a natural and endemic component of adolescence, or of education, that it also is often unrecognized as such?
- Do teachers cross boundaries with their students by asking them to be *too* creative, and by extension, possibly too personal?
- Do prevalent stereotypes of “creative” people hinder students’ willingness or desire to “be creative” themselves?
- Does a curriculum- and objective-centered education allow for creativity?
- Are there any real answers, even one?

WHAT THE MASTERS HAVE SAID SO FAR: RESEARCH ON CREATIVITY AND PARADOX

Having read at this point a substantial number of autobiographical accounts of creativity and personal creative experience, I will take the liberty of answering the last critical question from above, first. No, there do not seem to be any answers—not even one. Paradox strikes again.

Perhaps the most striking feature of all the autobiographical and reflective accounts of creative moments and episodes in these people’s own “creative” experiences, is the generally qualitative, and at times affective, nature of these self-told stories. The authors of these accounts and reflections are telling the stories of their “creative” selves—stories that, as such, at times overlap and at times exclude the more practical lives that they lead “outside” of the creative realm. They are describing the most subjective of subjective experiences. To the extent that they provide any type of road maps, the maps are merely

trails of where these creative individuals have gone along the way from *here* to *there*, or in some cases, from *there* to *here*. One might easily fathom that these stories are as close as the storytellers can come to wrapping descriptive terms drawn from a common language, around their utterly private, and often isolated experiences.

The theory that paradox is everywhere, though, fills a far deeper chasm than the irony of personal experience, particularly in terms of how it helps us to apprehend something more like general “principles” of creative experience. Commonalties exist within the self-told stories of creativity as often as do anomalies, though neither seem ever to evade paradox. The prodigies seem to have started without any teachers, and the innovators at times practically renounce responsibility for what they have created—“it merely came to me as such,” in a hundred different voices, “as it would to any thinking person.” Let me state that last piece of paradox even more succinctly: the “creative masters” do not typically attribute their own “creativity” to any *quantifiable* kind of research-type background in “how-to-be-a-creative-person” that they may or may not have lived through themselves. Likewise, a research-type survey of their “creative” autobiographies fails to produce, and even omits, any such *quantifiable* features of “creativity” per se. Instead, a survey of the self-told stories of “creativity” does provide us with at least some qualitative insights (and patterns, too, perhaps) that are illustrative of a loosely bound, yet undeniably identifiable amalgam of creative “works” that these people have created. Quantum physics, Picasso’s “blues,” a few bars of Charlie Parker, and on, ad infinitum—herein lies the marrow of creativity, but dare not to try to measure it or weigh it. There is no formula, no equation; there seems only to be an elusive kind of balance.

Existing somewhere in this balance is one essential question that must be put forth before one can delve too much further into the many paradoxes that exist in creativity, and in creative experience. *What does it mean for a person “to be creative”?* The immediate paradox is obvious enough—it means something different for everyone. Beyond that, though, some answers will lean towards notions of production, others towards originality, some towards inspiration, and of course some will lean towards beauty and aesthetics.

The question itself, taken at face value, admittedly would be more or less invalid, and fruitless, too, unless one concedes de facto that the answers will necessarily vary from person to person and from artist to artist. Otherwise, would not a number of painters all have independently created the *Mona Lisa*, each in his or her own studio, drawing from his or her own resources, and without the knowledge of *identical* masterpieces being created elsewhere in the world? Or, would Neruda and Shakespeare not have written *identical* sonnets, each unaware of the other’s having written the very same words on paper, hundreds of years and miles apart from one another? If people were all creative in precisely the same way, people would all create their music, paintings, poetry, and other art forms in precisely the same way, too. The world would be hued with an eerie cast of duplication. And how creative would that be?

Nonetheless, understanding where others have placed themselves in the miasma—or the ether—of creativity and creative experience can lend insights that will help us to understand our own creative selves more fully, and to help our students understand their creative selves more fully as well. To some extent we might find ourselves more able to define our “creative” selves in the same terms that others have used before us, and, at the same time, we might very well define our creative selves in opposition to the way that others have done so. Either way, it is possible for us to answer the question for ourselves (what does it mean for a person to be creative) by considering how other people have answered that same question for themselves.

Max Ernst offers a response to this question that can just as easily be considered an answer to, as an evasion of, the question itself. He writes this of a person, specifically an author, in the throes of *being creative*: “The author is present as a spectator, indifferent or impassioned, at the birth of his own work” (Ghiselin, 59). Ernst’s idea of the author/artist/creator as a spectator really suggests that a person who is *being creative* might in fact be doing nothing at all but watching that which unfolds before him. Ghiselin offers an idea similar to Ernst’s when he writes this about a poet writing a poem: “the poem seems to issue from the dark of the mind without much awareness of how it comes” (Ghiselin, 127). There is danger in these ideas, though, and the danger is that the recalcitrant student who latches on to this idea might just have found himself a fairly strong justification for assuming his “spectator” role as a student (*non?-*) creator. Despite the danger here, Ernst’s statement, and Ghiselin’s, too, encapsulates several important ideas.

First, the author/artist/creator is not relying on instruction, modeling, or studying theories or practices of creativity in order *to be creative*. A tentative conclusion, if Ernst is indeed correct—at least not wholly incorrect, is that creativity is an attainable goal for people (us, the masses—public educators), and thus of course for our students, too. Another important idea that can be extrapolated from Ernst’s belief is that an author/artist/creator need not be held accountable for articulating the roadmap of his or her own creativity. I accept this idea as being true. Otherwise, I would have a difficult time in this endeavor, drawing as I am from the ideas of so many creative people whose accounts of creativity differ as widely as they do from one another. Ernst’s understanding of the author/artist/creator as a spectator also offers a strong foundation for the idea that creativity, per se, is hardly a quantifiable subject. How does one go about measuring the degree to which one is engaged as a “spectator”? This question has enormous implications for how we evaluate our students. Particularly, one can not help but to see the paradox with Ernst: if the creator is only a spectator, then who is *actually* the creator?

Responses to this question will vary as widely as the answers will to the question of what it means to be creative. Even so, several responses do speak to the question of who the creator actually is. K.D. Lang goes so far as to disclaim her own creativity, and in doing so, she recognizes a specific person as the (re)source for her creativity. She writes:

I feel like my voice is somebody else's. I take care of the shell, but it's not mine ... in these songs I was paying back Patsy Cline as best I could. It wasn't just emulation. She got me going (lecture, Jacobs, January 2000).

Arthur Miller describes the creative experience of writing *Death of a Salesman* in a similar manner, by referencing voices other than his own as the source of his creativity. He differs from Lang, though, in that the voices he describes are the voices of his characters rather than the voice of a model or mentor. He writes of the play: "It sort of unveiled itself. I was the stenographer. I could hear them [the characters], literally" (Miller, 1998).

Amy Lowell begins from a starting point similar to both Ernst's and Miller's viewpoint on understanding creativity, but she offers a simile that endows the author/artist/creator spectator with a greater capacity to impact the work that is being created. She writes: "Let us admit at once that the poet is something like a radial aerial—he is capable of receiving messages on waves of some sort" (Ghiselin, 110). She leaps beyond the spectator/receiver idea, though, as she continues to make a stronger point: "but he is more than an aerial, for he possesses the capacity of transmuting these messages into the patterns of words we call poems (Ghiselin, 110). Lowell uses a "tricky" word here, in her consideration of creativity: *capacity*. A capacity *could* be considered as an ability, and thus something like a talent, a skill, or a body of learned knowledge, or it could mean something on the other end of the spectrum—something like a still-open potential, that at least has yet to be negated.

Both Ernst and Lowell clearly speak to one of the qualitative elements common to many considerations of creativity: if nothing else, creativity is a capacious thing. Creation stories of Genesis and others allude explicitly to that capacious void which had to be filled, the void that preceded the creation itself. And, the filling of the capacious void as an element in creative experience does not stop with Ernst and Lowell. Indeed, are not those artists who speak of the imperative to create, also speaking of a void which they so intensely feel must be filled, or in some cases, must be emptied? In fact, authors and artists who speak of the need to create often indicate that they feel they have no choice: I must write, I must paint, I must create. Housman alludes to this imperative when he describes how poems would "bubble up" in his mind, and carry themselves onward with a stalwart momentum: "[they] would flow into my mind, with sudden and unaccountable emotion, sometimes a line or two of verse, sometimes a whole stanza at once" (Ghiselin, 91).

Picasso offers perhaps the clearest embodiment of the related notions of capacity and imperative, and in one sense, too, of the artist as spectator, as these notions relate to creativity and a person's "*being creative*." He states that "the painter goes through states of fullness and evacuation. That is the whole secret of art" (Goldwater and Treves, 421).

Picasso further explains this idea with a personal example of how creativity functions for *him* in both a capacious and imperative manner. He continues: “I go for a walk in the forest of Fontainebleau. I get ‘green’ indigestion. I must get rid of this sensation into a picture. Green rules it. A painter paints to unload himself of feelings and visions” (Goldwater and Treves, 421). While a putrid sense of bathos does pervade Picasso’s description of his “creative” self, he does offer an idea about creativity that many people know to be consistent with their own personal experience, in a much more general sense. The process of unloading, whether by speaking, yelling, writing, painting, or singing, is often endemic to a person’s creativity. Unloading emotions and images can “create” a new ontological reality for many people—a new peace, a new hope, a new perspective. The phenomenon of “being creative” is no less ontological in the creation of art, than it is in the course of life in general.

Picasso departs significantly from Ernst and Lowell’s views, however, by considering the author/artist/creator to be *more* than a mere spectator, even though some notion of the artist as spectator does exist in his story of “green.” Was he not a *kind* of spectator, or at least a kind of consumer, of the green? For Picasso, like Lowell, the author/artist/creator actually interacts with the subject, the process, and the product of creativity, but Picasso’s interaction is far more involved than Lowell’s views would permit. *He* (Picasso) is the one who took the walk and overdosed on green. *He* is the one who felt he “must” get rid of the green. And, the feelings and visions that he must unload are therefore genuinely “*his*.” The idea of spectator should not be too severely limited as referring only to being purely passive. I think of a certain family member as a spectator at the antique mall (dragged there, unimpressed, trying to sleep on a bench somewhere), and I think of the same man as a spectator at the Indy 500 (Judgment-Day-has-arrived energy). Obviously, a spectator can have degrees of interaction with whatever he is spectator to.

Picasso typifies the creative individual whose creativity is in no manner the consequence of his having received particular training, research, modeling, or mentoring. His capacity to render images visually appeared merely to be inherent in his constitution. As such, Picasso must have known a kind of freedom that schooled-artists only attain at a latter point in their creative careers. The freedom existed in his automatic fluency with his *métier*, and also became manifest in a sense of certainty that he had about his subjects. Picasso, the man who ingested and regurgitated colors, was in his own eyes not merely a spectator or receptacle for images, voices, or characters. Rather, he was a creative person who read his own “mark,” or presence, in his work. He stated: “When I paint[,] my object is to show what I have found and not what I am looking for” (Goldwater and Treves, 417). He further states: “The idea of the object will have left an indelible mark. It is what started the author off, excited his ideas, and stirred up his emotions. Ideas and emotions will in the end be prisoners in his work” (Goldwater and Treves, 420).

Picasso extended the relationship of the artist to the work by allying himself not only with his subject, but also with its form, through his creation of a new form of visual art—cubism. But once again, the source of the creation was neither research on “how-to-be-a-

creative-individual,” nor the next step in applying technique to his craft. Picasso describes the creation of cubism as an altogether subjective experience, not to mention free and capacious. He says: “When we invented cubism we had no intention whatever of inventing cubism. We wanted simply to express what was in us. Not one of us drew up a plan of campaign, and our friends, the poets, followed our efforts attentively, but they never dictated to us” (Goldwater and Treves, 420). If paradox really is everywhere, then it is no less so here—in the creation of a school of art—than it is anywhere. The obvious paradox is that creating this particular form of creativity, the school of art, was unintentional. In fact, would one not presume the opposite to be the case, that something as utterly personal as creating your own school of art would be more “on purpose,” and not merely unintentional?

Herein lies yet another dangerous idea, and one I fear we must always try to answer for ourselves as teachers. How do we respond to a student who creates an utterly unique manner of presenting his own ideas or mastery of a subject, in lieu of the cherished five-paragraph essay? The fact that many teachers recognize that individual freedom in choosing modes of expression can enhance learning and mastery, is abundantly evident in the increasing popularity of the use of multi-genre projects. In these projects, students use diverse media and genres to illustrate their learning. Teachers who recognize the capacity for freedom and its learning benefits for students whose decisions (logical, intuitive, or seemingly random) determine the form of their expression, will also agree with Seurat’s conclusion about where (in the process, or in the work) the beauty will reside. As he states: “Everything is contained in the beauty of the work itself” (Goldwater and Treves, 381).

Like Picasso, Seurat also held the belief that the artist’s own emotions impacted the work that was being created. Seurat might more properly be considered, though, at some point between Ernst’s and Picasso’s ends of the creativity spectrum. Unlike Picasso, Seurat viewed the process of an artist’s emotions impacting the work as an unconscious process, much as Ernst and others did. Seurat wrote, “All the sentiment of a work comes unconsciously, or nearly so, from the artist’s soul” (Goldwater and Treves, 380). This notion of unconsciousness, or of the artist as unconscious, hearkens back to the notion of the creative person as spectator, receiver, or aerial. If a person is not *consciously* and *deliberately* handling the sentiment or emotion of a work, then how much more involved can he be than as a mere spectator?

Mozart also articulated his beliefs on how the unconscious impacted his own work, and he seems to strike a balance between those who view the creative work as having merely passed through the artist, and those who consider the creative work to be a manifestation of one’s own self. He fits somewhere in the midst of this balance insofar as he recognizes that his ideas *stem* from his *unconsciousness*, but he also considered them nonetheless totally, completely *his* ideas.

Mozart saw his own ideas come forth during periods of time in which he was alone and in a particular state of mind: “When I am, as it were, completely myself, entirely alone and in good cheer ... my ideas flow best and most abundantly” (Ghiselin, 34). Certainly Mozart was not the only individual to require particular conditions for *being creative*. I think back now on the undergraduate nights at coffee houses when poems and papers only agreed to flow forth from my hand under such conditions. But, considering that Mozart was the prodigious genius he was, it does seem another paradox that such a genius had pre-requisites upon which his creativity depended. Even so, he felt little control over generating the ideas he had, at least in terms of forcing them to somehow emerge. He wrote: “*Whence and how they come, I know not; nor can I force them*” (Ghiselin, 34). Even so, Mozart profoundly believed that the ideas were “his.” He wrote:

But why my productions take from my hand that particular form and style that makes them Mozartish, and different from the works of other composers, is probably owing to the same cause which renders my nose so large or so aquiline, or, in short, makes it Mozart’s (Ghiselin, 35).

Whether one speaks of Seurat’s soul, or Mozart’s nose, one must see that both men consider their individuality (of person, of creativity) inviolable. Those *are* Mozart’s sonatas and operas, and those *are* Seurat’s paintings of the French coast.

While many authors, painters, and creative individuals do subscribe to some notion of the unconscious as an important factor in creativity, neither Mozart’s nor Seurat’s perspectives are a clean standard. They do in fact return us, though, to one of the very paradoxes that opened this consideration—the response that people will have to that question about what it means to “*be creative*.” Whatever the role of the unconscious, whatever the degree to which one is a spectator at the birth of his own work, whatever the degree to which one interacts with the form of his or her art, whatever the degree of prodigious genius or school training, an individual who is “*being creative*” has every right and entitlement to be so on his own terms, and his creation will be as individual as he is himself. There is still the one question, though: what *does* it mean to “*be creative?*” And in regards to *that* stubborn question—*better luck counting stars...*

THE CREATIVITY “HOW TO”: 10 DAYS OF CREATIVITY

This unit will be used with 9th grade English students, both regular and Pre-IB/AP. The curriculum unit has two main objectives. First, students will critically examine examples of creative endeavors of people whose “creativity” or “creative accomplishments” are—more than less—indisputable, such as accomplished artists, poets, songwriters, or actors and actresses. This critical examination will occur in the form of discussion, group collaboration, and written response. Second, students will actively engage in creative endeavors of their own. These endeavors will be based upon either the works of the creative people examined in class, or on the individual inspiration that the students are

likely to glean from some of these creatively “accomplished” people. I will utilize the following strategies to accomplish these objectives.

Strategy #1: Oral Discussion (Day 1)

I intend to begin the unit by posing to the students some of the questions that we have explored in our seminar. These questions will include: What *is* creativity? How do creative people create? Where does their “inspiration” come from? Where does talent come from? Students will need to have a strong sense of their own answers to these questions before they can critically examine the creative accomplishments of any artists or authors in a truly meaningful manner. The students must have their own understanding of some of these issues as a context in which they can consider the curriculum they will encounter. As a pre-discussion focus activity, I will ask students to respond to the questions above in a one- to two-page journal entry, so that the students will have an opportunity to formulate and organize their own ideas prior to the class discussion.

For the discussion itself, I will use a graded-discussion format in which students receive participation credit, with their contributions rated and recorded on a scale of poor/marginal/good/excellent/phenomenal. Students receive more credit for phenomenal contributions, less credit for good, etc. Through this discussion format, students will be encouraged to question, challenge, support, and defend the perspectives offered by other students. I anticipate that many students will continue to develop and alter their perspectives through the course of the discussion. Again, the objective of the discussion will be to establish enough familiarity with some of the more general questions surrounding creativity so that when they do examine individuals and their works, they will have a context within which to do so.

Strategy #2: Group Collaboration (Day 2)

Once students have completed the graded discussion, I will proceed with the unit by dividing students into groups of 3 to 4 students. Each group will be asked to generate 5 criteria by which they would judge a person as being creative or not. Each group will then also be asked to identify 3 to 5 people that the group together considers to be the most creative people, according to the criteria that the students have generated themselves. In order to facilitate their work, I will model criteria for them, such as “how unique is their talent?” or “how widely recognized is the artist?” I will also suggest that they consider people from today’s popular culture and from all walks of life, present and past included. The groups will have 30 minutes to complete the criteria and the selection of individuals.

Within the groups, each student will have a specific role. One student will be the scribe for the criteria, one person will be the scribe for the selected individuals, one person will be the spokesperson for the group, and one person will be the board-writer.

During the last 20 minutes of the activity, the spokesperson for each group will share the criteria and the individuals designated by the group, and the board-writer will write on the board the names of the people identified by the group as being creative. This way, students will compare both their criteria, and the people they identified as being creative, with those identified by the other groups in the class.

Strategy #3: Mini-Lessons (Day 3 – Day 7)

Once the students have acquired their own sense of creativity, and have begun to put their hands around the concepts of how, why, or which people they believe are creative, I will begin to introduce other individuals to them through mini-lessons. In conjunction with these mini-lessons, I will also use Strategy #4: The Creative Journal, which is described in greater detail below. The content of each mini-lesson will focus on one particular author or artist (and I use the term all-inclusively). For each mini-lesson, students will first be introduced to examples of the person’s creative works, such as his or her paintings, songs, poems, etc. Vincent Van Gogh will be among the first artists that the students will study. I intend to procure several books of his paintings so that the students will have the opportunity to peruse a number of his paintings, and to become acquainted with the general features of his style. The uniqueness and intensity of Van Gogh’s work renders him popular among students, and hopefully this popularity will incite reactions from the students.

Once students have examined the artist’s work, they will then read biographical or autobiographical material pertaining to the process or the experience of the artist’s “creativity.” The materials used for this portion of the mini-lesson will be brief. The point is not for the students to conduct research, but rather for the students to hear from the artists themselves, about their own work. For Van Gogh, for example, students will read only one letter, or perhaps a few short excerpts from several letters, in which he reveals the passions and frustrations that marked his experiences painting. In some cases the students might read only a paragraph or a page—just enough for the students to have an impression, or a taste, of the artist’s perspective about what he or she has created, the process of creating, the source of inspiration, etc. To ensure comprehension, students will answer brief reading questions for the selections prior to responding to the artist and his work in their creative journals.

In addition, when it is applicable, students will also examine other creative works that might have been inspired by the artists’ works. For example, students will listen to the song “Vincent,” written and sung by Don McLean, as an example of how one person responded to and processed the inspiration that was gleaned from another artist’s works. As an extension activity, students might also view examples of works that Van Gogh himself received inspiration from, such as Delacroix’s *Pieta*. This extension will also provide models that students will find helpful in completing Strategy #5, The Creative Project, in which students will have the opportunity to use inspiration they have gleaned from one of the artists, in order to produce a work of their own creation.

The following individuals will be included in the mini-lessons, with one mini-lesson devoted to each person: Vincent Van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Edgar Allen Poe, and one Young Adult (YA) Literature novelist (Zindel, Hobbs, Paulsen, and Nixon could each be used successfully). In addition, the first individuals that students will study will most likely be either visual or musical artists, primarily because I anticipate that students will have an easier time looking at or listening to “creativity” than they will reading it. Once the students have critically examined the works of visual and musical artists, and responded to them, students should be better able to read and respond to written creative works. Of course some students will naturally be drawn to one genre or another, and may exhibit greater fluency with certain genres. For this reason, I have deliberately selected artists of different genres. If a student does not glean any inspiration from one genre, then hopefully he will from one of the others. Also, students will be encouraged to compare these artists to others with whom they might be more personally familiar.

Strategy #4: The Creative Journal (Used Throughout the Unit)

In conjunction with the mini-lessons for each artist, students will record all of their written responses in a “creativity journal” that will serve both as a learning log and assessment tool, and also as a resource for each student’s individual creativity project. Following each mini-lesson, students will respond in their journals to any of the following prompts, as they relate to the artist and works of that day’s mini-lesson. Students must use each of the following prompts at least once, but they may choose which prompt to use with which mini-lesson. The prompts are:

- What feelings or emotions are called forth from within *you*, after looking at this artist’s work?
- Assume the persona and voice of the artist. Narrate your thoughts as you were creating this piece.
- Assume the persona and voice of the artist. Twenty years (or more) have passed since you created this piece. What are your thoughts or feelings about it now?
- Interpret the piece according to symbols, tones, melodies, colors, lines, shapes, textures, etc.—or any other distinguishing features within the work itself. What do they express, in terms of ideas, thoughts, or emotions? Is this piece *about* something (joy, pain, excitement, imprisonment)?
- What memory or daydream is conjured up for you by this piece?

The length of the journal entries should each be between 1 ½ and 2 handwritten pages, minimum. In addition, students may also make additional entries in response to other artists and works, even if they have not been studied in class. A student might choose, for example, to write an entry about a favorite musician, novelist, or actress. Students may also add to the prompts above, provided that they have still responded to the actual prompt.

Additionally, each student will re-read his or her “creative journal,” and then write one final entry (**Day 8**). The entry will serve as an introduction (or conclusion, really) to the creative journal. For this last entry, students will answer the following question: *Is art contagious? —Can one person’s art inspire another person’s art?* (Or, to put it another way, can one person’s creativity inspire another person’s creativity?)

The creative journal will be assessed according to how fully the entries are developed in response to the artists and their works, and to the extent that the prompts have all been successfully used. This journal will also be the means by which the mini-lessons remain student-centered, rather than teacher-centered. Through individual analysis and response via the creative journal, students will be using their own thoughts and reactions to the artists and works as the foundation for their engagement in the learning process. The journal will also be a means by which students can consider the form that they would like for their culminating project to take.

Strategy #5: The Culminating Project (Day 9 – Day 10, and Outside of Class)

The culminating project will require several things of the students, and they will have several options in how they wish to complete their projects. The primary objective of the project will be for each student to create his or her own creative work. For the project, the students may model any of the genres or forms that we will have studied in class, which means that their works may be visual, musical, poetic, narrative, or performance pieces. The students also have the option to select a form of their own creation for their pieces, drawing upon inspiration that they might have experienced while studying the artists in class, or from those they have studied on their own. If a student chooses a genre that we have not examined in class, then their project must nonetheless meet certain criteria. It must be concrete (not an idea), presentable or viewable, safely within the bounds of all school rules, and within parameters of a form that the student can explain in the written autobiographical account described below. Whether the student is following a genre or artist that they have studied in class, or one that they have studied on their own, I will require that the piece be a top-quality effort that will be suitable for publication within the classroom or elsewhere in the school. Each student will also title his or her creative work.

In addition to the creative work itself, each student will be required to compose a written autobiographical account of his or her creative experience, answering the following guiding questions:

- Where did the inspiration come from?
- How did you know that it was inspiration?
- What did the experience feel like? Could you repeat it again?
- Did anything inside of you “take over,” or maybe “shut down”?
- Describe the experience of creating your work.
- Is there a memory, or emotion, that you associate with this work?

- How did you select the title?

Other questions may be included to help *guide* students in their accounts, but students should not be restricted by any of these questions. Two days (**Days 9 and 10**) will be spent in class drafting the autobiography, and conferencing with the teacher. These two days will be scheduled after students have had time to complete the majority of their projects, but before they are actually due to be turned in. The autobiographical account will be a minimum two-page, typed, multi-paragraph narrative.

The project, including the remainder of the autobiography, will be completed outside of class, and students will have two weeks to complete the project and the autobiography. I will use the following criteria to assess the projects, on a 100 pt. scale:

- Presentation Quality (20 pts.)
- Distinguishable Signs of Effort (including thoroughness, drafts, preliminary sketches, deliberate attention to detail), (20 pts.)
- Resourcefulness, either in using inspiration within a studied genre, or in selecting a more appropriate genre (20 pts.)
- Integrity of the work—can the work be viewed or interpreted in a meaningful manner without relying upon explanation from the artist? (20 pts.)
- Self-Rating of Success of the Work—students will award themselves between 1 and 20 points, according to how successful they feel their work is in expressing or conveying what they intended to (20 pts.)

Again, the final products will be published in the classroom or elsewhere in the school.

I will assess the accompanying autobiographies on a 100 pt. scale as well, according to the following criteria:

- Narrative responds to guide questions in a thoughtful and meaningful manner (40 pts.)
- Narrative reflects insight gained from personal experience with the creative process (20 pts.)
- Narrative enhances meaningful understanding of the project (20 pts.)
- Narrative follows conventions of form and mechanics (20 pts.)

TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS

I anticipate, and admittedly, intend, that students' work throughout this unit will be fraught with paradox in one form or another. My hope is that the curriculum portion of the unit itself directly and indirectly addresses the critical questions about creativity and paradox that I posed earlier. I anticipate that each student will find his or her own, unique manner of "*being creative*." I anticipate, too, that some students will rely on me to model creativity for them, while others will turn away as I do. I do not believe that some kids will "just have it;" I believe that all

kids will. I foresee learning myself from the students just how the “where” and the “when” parameters affect their creativity. I hope that I do not open a Pandora’s box for any of my students with this project, but I recognize that people, teenagers particularly, are elusively complex, and that many students will channel their work efforts in differing degrees of publicity and privacy. I hope as well that my assessment instruments are fair, and that they succeed in measuring, not just for me, but for the students, too, the extent of their achievements. I hope that we can evade stereotypes. And, I hope that together we can find some answers. Even one would be fine.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Gardner, Howard. *Creating Minds: An Anatomy of Creativity Seen Through the Lives of*

Freud, Einstein, Stravinsky, Eliot, Graham, and Ghandi. New York; BasicBooks, 1993.

Gardner interposes theories about creativity while illustrating their relevance to the creative lives of the above individuals. This text is enormously helpful for teachers. Excerpts would be appropriate for secondary students.

Ghiselin, Brewster, ed. *The Creative Process: Reflections on Invention in the Arts and*

Sciences. Berkley: University of California Press, 1952.

Ghiselin has collected writings from various artists, authors, and other creative individuals. Selections convey diverse autobiographical responses to origins, stages, and processes of creativity. This is an excellent source for teachers selecting excerpts of autobiographical input from the artists themselves. Students will find these excerpts helpful in completing their own journals and projects.

Goldwater, Robert, and Marco Treves, eds. *Artists on Art: From the XIV to the XX*

Century. New York: Pantheon Books, 1945.

This anthology includes selections from primary and secondary sources for biographical and autobiographical information on major artists. Many excerpts offer the artist's perspectives about his or her own art, as well as the art of others. This is an excellent source for teachers and students needing material relating to a specific artist.

Jacobs, David. Lecture, University of Houston: Houston Teachers Institute Seminar,

January 2000.

Miller, Arthur. Interview. *New Yorker*, December, 1998.

Stein, Susan Alyson. *Van Gogh: A Retrospective.* New York: Park Lane, 1986.

Stein has collected personal letters, biographies, essays, and reproductions of many of Van Gogh's paintings. This is an outstanding source for information, as well as visual reproductions of his paintings.

Wheldon, Keith. *Van Gogh.* New York: Gallery Books, 1989.

Wheldon has collected reproductions of some of Van Gogh's more famous paintings, in addition to biographical information and personal letters. This is an excellent textual and visual resource for teachers and students.