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Alchemy in Education: Towards a Preschool Model in College Classrooms

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Education has long been a necessary, yet standardized procedure with little difference from program to program or school to school. In this paper I argue that more of a creative approach using existing educational models such as preschool education would serve us well in the development of student skills at all levels, including college. I also contend that an alchemical metaphor would be useful in the application and acknowledgement of the value of such an approach.

Keywords: alchemy, education, preschool, classroom

As an instructor, parent and student, I find myself thinking about creativity and how we acknowledge it. I am always falling back into the words we use, and thinking about the effect they have on our perception of creativity. Western culture has long reserved the word creative for the great artists, first and foremost and then as a complimentary adjective for the rest of us after we have completed a task of some sort. In discussing the process of creativity, Peat (2003) outlines a more natural application of the artistic process using the notion of alchemy:

I'm suggesting that consciousness arises out of processes deep within the body that are projected, by means of creative acts, onto the external world where they can then be internalized into awareness. In other words, while our awareness, our direct consciousness of rational thought, involves the purposeful manipulation of internalized mental states, concepts and so on, the source of all of this lies much deeper. Indeed, it's origin is a hypothetical location in brain or body than it is a process, an indivisible cyclical movement of projection and internalization, one of making manifest within the realm of the physical and then of ingestion, in coded or symbolic form, back into the world of the mental. In this creativity, resembles an alchemical cycle in which the creative gold is generated within the alembic of body and mind.
(p. 2)

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Like most of our reflections on certain skills (math comes to mind. I always hear students refer to themselves in terms of the mathematical deficiencies: “Oh I’m not a math person”), I am always hearing students say they are not creative because they are not artistic or “good at art”. Art, like math has become a thing we can or cannot do, thus creativity is immediately limited to an activity or some sort of outcome. Creativity also seems to be the domain of human endeavors as opposed to nature, where the inspiration for a good deal of art finds its origin and is arguably the source of the most creative functioning we see. I think this is in large part due to the fact that creativity has to be a reflection of some work or effort, whereas we usually see the work of nature as survival, or necessity. Using Peat’s alchemic metaphor allows us to apply art and thus creativity to endeavors other than art and gives us all a chance to be “artists”. We can essentially take art out of the singular domain of the artist and apply it in some of our everyday activities and endeavors such as education. Creativity has long been a focus of educational research attempting to isolate the best methods of delivery for skill specific instruction. Here, again, creativity is addressed as an outcome and has been used to assess a variety of classroom related skills including motivation (Starko, 2005), discipline (Isaksen, Firestien, & Murdock, 1990) , and social skills (Riolas-Cortez, 2000). But can education, or more specifically the process of education truly be creative?

It’s not uncommon to find students past and present that speak fondly of their preschool years. But what of the rest of our educational career? Do we remember that as fondly or do we find that we were among the many who felt left out, lost, bored, or simply just part of a process? Most of us tend to view education as a means to an end. I recall growing up that both of my parents would often mention college as the reason my grades at every level of schooling needed to be of a certain level. A good deal of my motivation was also linked to academic performance (gifts for high grades, punishment for low ones) and the idea of college was a given. Though we are quick to acknowledge the importance of education, how much time have we spent examining the process as a means to an end? As a college instructor of 20 years, I have often heard students recall their experiences beyond preschool and kindergarten in a negative light and many feel the same about their college experiences as well. Very few mention a love of learning or the importance of knowledge to their development and future social contributions. Many from that very same group will often recall their preschool and kindergarten experiences positively and have no difficulty recalling the names of their teachers, some of the daily activities, and even their classmates.

When asked why they come to college, students will often state that they want a degree so they can become employed. I have often wondered how we have arrived at such an unpopular, utilitarian view of our educational experience. How is it that something we do for 12-16 years of our lives has become accepted as a necessary evil?

I find that this question has led me to a good deal of informal observation. As I walk the halls and grounds of my college campus, I often try to peer into the windows and classrooms to see if I see any signs of enjoyment. While some students look compelled, many look busy, simply taking notes, while a good portion seem uninterested or bored. At this juncture it is important for me to mention that I do not feel this is always the fault of the instructor or a result of the subject matter. Having been in education for most of my career as both an instructor and administrator, I realize that there are many limitations to the classroom and curriculum that can work against any teacher. When I drop off my

children to preschool however, I rarely see any disinterest and students seem to not only be engaged, but excited as well. It is also true that this level of education is amongst the most important in our development as learners focusing not only on subjects taught, but the actual development of the love for learning.

Aside from the obvious age differences, and the level of subject matter, there exist a good deal of similarities in structure between preschool and college. The typical preschool learning module consists of the following:

- Duration: 30-40 minutes.
- Topic Introduction: 5-10 minutes
- Creative learning exercises employing music, art or group play (two): 15 minutes each
- Summary/Debrief-5-10 minutes

Each lesson, no matter how time consuming is interwoven into this schedule so that learning takes place at a variety of levels. Time and differing levels of student ability are usually cited as the greatest time constraints by most educators, yet here they not only thrive but coexist. Schedules are even manipulated so that students can attend five, three or even two days a week and still receive the same instruction. Though at the higher levels of education the structure is far different, there are still similarities in the daily schedule. The piece most obviously absent in education beyond kindergarten is the creative learning portion of the preschool schedule which utilizes music and art to advance the curriculum. Since the existence of different learning styles has been well documented, this could ensure that there is a variety of ways course material is presented so to accommodate each.

It is not difficult to find students at the later levels of education who still rely on the creative learning methods that they were taught during preschool. As an instructor at the college level, the majority of my students still rely on mnemonic memory devices like the ones they were taught in preschool. They create innovative ways to memorize their materials (some even writing songs or poems that include course materials) that are very similar to preschool applications like the alphabet song. When did creativity become a skill only few possessed and were relegated solely to the arts? In preschool, artistic endeavors and activities are a main component of the curriculum, but then as we continue on, education becomes a single subject focus. "Art" becomes is a individual course, usually an elective, or even completely absent in some schools with financial difficulties as art programs are amongst the earliest casualties of budget cuts. I recall Mary Catherine Bateson's notion of the creativity of everyday actions and seem to think that this should apply to a new definition or at least term by which we describe creativity. Bateson discusses creativity as a "composition" of human expression. Here creativity can be discussed in terms of everyday interactions where the participants in dialogues creatively choose the methods in which they will respond. This "ordinary creativity" is an essential component in the composition of our selves, which reveals our essence in the larger social fabric that our "ordinary creativity" (and thus dialogue) take place. She Writes:

The conventions we have developed for labeling a few individuals creative, contrasting them with others, often

depend on originality or on later recognition. These conventions leave unrecognized the creativity of the ordinary, which may remain invisible or may involve multiple small moments of discovery that are only original for the individual involved. This deprives us of a range of models for the creative process. More seriously, it may blind us to the way in which small acts of the ordinary creativity weave and reweave the fabric that makes social life possible. Ordinary creativity plays an essential role in education. Educators have recognized that when a child learns by discovery or reinvention those things which are already well known and could be conveyed by instruction, this kind of creativity makes other kinds of creativity possible.” (Cited in Montuori and Purser, 1999, p. 153).

As an instructor of communication study, the act of creativity has become an important part of the curriculum, whose focus is human behavior. The standard process of the classroom and education in general, has us as instructors lecturing on the process but doing very little to apply the alchemical metaphor and thus give our students more than one way to acknowledge and discover their creativity. But indeed, tapping creativity is foremost amongst our goals for our students yet our current methodologies for instruction do little to allow this. In my classes, I have begun to implement the creative learning component found in the preschool learning module, in which students are invited to create their own models in groups (usually using art supplies I bring to class) so that they can see how the curriculum can be related to their own lives as well as allow the creative component, or alchemy to take place. The results so far have been encouraging and I have found that students are more able to recall the information once they have applied it to their own lives through the creative process.

I truly believe that as we write the curriculum for our courses, and at the levels that we educate our future teachers we can return to various successful aspects of preschool models and reemphasize a good deal of the alchemical nature of preschool education. This would go a long way towards making education a creative exercise again as well as giving our students a variety of ways to comprehend the material regardless of their learning styles.

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