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The Transformative Potential of Creative Assignments in Higher Education

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This paper encourages shifts in praxis to promote the thoughtful inclusion of creativity into higher education assignments in order to broaden and deepen student experience, and offer greater integration between required assignments and the complexity of students' lives. Obstacles to integrating creativity into academia are also briefly explored. An example of what is meant by a creative assignment, from a second-year undergraduate Community Studies course, is offered, illustrating the transformative learning potential that can be stimulated through this application. Faculty observations and quotes from student surveys serve as additional evidence of students' enthusiasm, growth, and personal empowerment achieved through this type of assignment.

Introduction

> …creativity is more than just fashionable – there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that it is already one of the key drivers of commercial success and social betterment. By implication, universities should be teaching those aspects of creativity that are amenable to being learned. (McWilliam, 2007, p. 2)

As the above quote asserts, there are incentives to integrating creativity into higher education in order to meet the needs of the modern workforce as well as to facilitate students' growth into the richness of becoming more fully human. Likewise, there are also constraints on incorporating creativity into academia, ranging from the personal to the systemic. These include resistance on all levels: from administration, faculty, student, and government policy (Jackson, 2008).

At the most basic level, the complexity of the concept of creativity itself can be perceived as an obstacle (Jackson, 2008). Though creativity and creative thinking are well explored within the literature, definitions remain wide ranging, and thus, confusing to the practitioner. In educational contexts, creativity can involve self-expression and the arts, imagination, producing something original, working across disciplines, demonstrating openness to experiences, or complex problem solving (McWilliam & Dawson, 2008).

Despite accumulating data about the value of creativity in all realms of life, creativity is rarely an overt learning objective in higher education, with the obvious exception of the fine and performing arts (Donnelly, 2004). This is seen in contrast to critical thinking, which

has been embraced from preschool on up to the highest levels of teaching and learning (Brookfield, 1991; Case, 2005). Creativity and critical thinking are often perceived as residing at opposite ends of a spectrum – the first based in the imagination and the non-rational, the second grounded in rational and logical processes. Yet literature repeatedly acknowledges that creativity and critical thinking are intertwined (Clegg, 2008; Paul & Elder, 2008). For educators, focusing on one at the expense of the other reinforces a false dichotomy – one simply does not have one without the other in day-to-day functioning.

Though teaching to multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983) is sometimes integrated into higher education classrooms, when it comes to enhancing student understanding of course materials through assignments, more often than not faculty revert to papers, essays, and exams. Assignments are one place where creativity can be incorporated into teaching and learning, reaching beyond linguistic intelligence to incorporate inter- and intra-personal knowing, as well as engaging with kinaesthetic, musical, and other realms of expression. With clear pedagogical intentions, creative assignments can support students' growth and transformation within any discipline (Donnelly, 2004). These are not, however, just 'tricks of the trade' to be dropped into standard course delivery. They need to be integrated with curricular goals that make it clear why students are being asked to think and act through the incorporation of creativity and creative assignments.

Context and Positionality

> At the center of transformative learning theory is the notion that we uncritically assimilate our values, beliefs, and assumptions from our family, community, and culture. In other words, we adopt the dominant ideology as the normal and natural way to think and act. When we are able to recognize that these beliefs are oppressive and not in our best interests, we can enter into a transformative learning process. (Taylor, Cranton, & Associates, 2012, p. 7)

Not surprisingly, there are a multitude of challenges when teaching from a transformative perspective within the hegemony of a traditional university system, with as many concomitant benefits for faculty and students. A significant issue is the fact that students arrive with expectations about what learning is supposed to look and feel like. Most are accustomed to running along well-worn educational tracks established over many years (e.g., what a learning environment looks like including classroom setup, teaching style, assignments, exams, etc.). When faced with their first creative assignment, one can almost see mental wheels spinning: 'This is not what academia is about. I'm supposed to be taking detailed notes from lectures, writing 30 page papers with references, and studying for tricky exams!' In Mezirow's (1990) conception of transformative learning, this represents a disorienting dilemma, often the initiating phase of an experience leading to the re-examination of previously held beliefs.

Much of the freedom I have 'to disorient' rests within the pedagogical premises and supporting structures of the department within which I teach. These include the co-creation of student-centred, collaborative learning environments that value learning processes as well as outcomes. Working with small student groups, I can offer opportunities to discover relationships, generate ideas, problem-solve, imagine, think outside the box, and engage in synthesis, all of which fall within the broad realm of creativity. I also model creativity in my teaching by incorporating music, theatre games, video, contemplation, storytelling, and graphic representations.

Students and I have observed benefits from incorporating creativity into assignments and the transformative potential of doing so. The assignments can open doors to deeper collaboration and more profound learning community experiences, while also helping to reconceptualize how learning can look and feel. As expressed by Taylor et al. (2012), using the arts as a form of creativity can "take us out of our heads and into our bodies, hearts, and souls in ways that allow us to connect more deeply with self and others" (p. 471). Students also indicate that creative assignments help to increase motivation and interest in the class, as revealed in these brief excerpts from a year-end survey regarding creative assignments offered to both first- and second-year undergraduates:

> *They made me really think outside-the-box and really express myself and not hold back.*

> *It [creative assignment] shows you what you're really capable of.*
>
> *You should do more of these! It made heading to class worth it.*
>
> *Kept me interested. Was a lot better than writing papers. And the assignments had more meaning.*

While the majority of student responses were positive, as faculty I observed clear differences between individual students' depth of understanding. Subsequent sharing and collaborative processing of an assignment often took students deeper than they were able to go on their own.

Over the course of the academic year, students wrote and performed two voice poems, produced rap songs, collaboratively crafted photo essays, artistically explored their worldviews, and designed YaYa boxes as a creative form of self-assessment. What follows is an example of a student assignment looked at in some detail, with image and words excerpted from a year-end survey. Also included are faculty pedagogical intentions and observations as recorded in a teaching journal, along with additional students' thoughts and comments.

A Worldview Assignment

I recently offered the Worldview Assignment in a second-year undergraduate *Approaches to Research* course. I introduced it early, prior to exploring the epistemology, ontology, and methodologies of the various research paradigms. My intentions were for students to come to understand their own worldviews and share them with one another. They were asked to reflect on the people, places, events, and other beings that influenced them to become who they were, exploring premises or beliefs that define the way they view themselves. From this perspective they could begin to grasp how worldviews are intimately connected to the ways in which we interpret, engage with, and act in daily life. My belief is that gaining insight into a diverse other's worldviews makes it easier to perceive the significance of different research approaches.

As this was one of the first creative assignments students encountered in academia, my introduction was met with blank stares and the inevitable question, 'But how many pages?' Consequently, time was spent elucidating the pedagogical premises for integrating creativity into academic assignments. Since they were asked to create a visual or musical representation, I emphasized that this work was not about artistic ability, but about accessing parts of themselves that can be constrained by words. I spoke to how this kind of activity can take us to places where our surface mind does not normally venture (Lawrence, 2005). Moving beyond language to visual or musical representations can allow us to challenge perceived limitations and stereotypes (Greene, 1995; Olson, 2005). I explained that this course would offer a balance of creative and more traditional work, and I confirmed that there was indeed no paper due.

For many, this challenged their definition of an academic assignment and constituted a disorienting dilemma, initiating a transformative learning experience "followed by a series of learning strategies involving critical reflection, exploration of different roles and options, and negotiation and re-negotiation of relationships" (Taylor, 1997, p. 51).

This assignment came in all sizes and formats, ranging from collages to digital representations. For example, Figure 1 was done on an 8 ½ x 11 sheet of paper with the use of pencil, ink, and watercolours. When presenting her worldview to her classmates, Connie (pseudonym) stood up and abruptly announced that she was autistic and that she normally would not share this information openly with peers, but that if we were to understand her worldview, this was crucial. She explained how at a young age her world seemed bright and sunny,

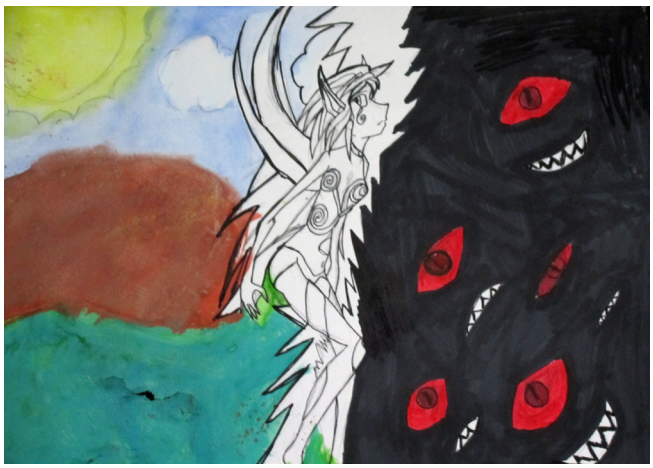

Figure 1

Sample Worldview Assignment

as represented on the left side of the drawing. However, upon entering junior high school she was bullied every day, and her view of the world became bleak. Wherever she looked she now saw evil and darkness, as represented on the right side of her drawing.

This was a key moment in the evolution of this group. Though only the third week of class, my observations showed evidence that Connie was beginning to be excluded due to some atypical behaviours. It was in the sharing of this assignment that light bulbs clicked on, as students recognized their exclusive tendencies. In creatively representing and communicating her worldview, Connie elicited areas of commonality among student experiences (such as being bullied) and heartfelt discussions ensued. This was not only an opening for Connie's transformation, but equally for others. In response to a year-end survey exploring students' experiences with the series of creative assignments, Connie was clear about the benefits of the worldview assignment:

> *For once I had to talk about my history instead of hiding it and being judged for my outlook...Let's face it, an essay wasn't going to bring out the raw emotion we saw in the worldview project.*

I participated in this first assignment in order to demonstrate that I saw myself as part of the learning community, as well as to model the depth and breadth I expected in creative assignments and the learning potential therein. As demonstrated elsewhere, educational environments where students experience a balance between safety and risk taking build trust and genuine relationships; appropriately challenging endeavours can be supportive of both transformative learning and the creative process (Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 2000; Kleiman, 2008). My own observations, student self-evaluations, and survey responses affirmed that this assignment had helped to bring about a profound shift in perspectives: Personal insights were gained, dominant norms about inclusivity were critically questioned and examined, and previously oppressive behaviours were challenged and revised.

A Few Words About Assessment

The aspect of creativity that poses the greatest challenge to teachers is how to assess it (Jackson, 2008). It should come as no surprise that, when experiencing the multiplicity of demands in academic life, faculty tend to fall back on the familiar. And yet, if our goal is to educate whole persons, accessing creativity in academic assignments is vitally important. As we ask students to step outside of their comfort zones, faculty also need to confront the hegemony of academic environments that control what is perceived as possible.

Furthermore, unless we locate ourselves within the fine arts, we are not trained to discern quality artistic representation, nor should we attempt to. It would also not be appropriate to attempt to evaluate whether or not transformative learning has transpired. What we are looking for is the student's level of engagement with the material. As Allam (2008) suggests, "It is necessary to separate process from product" (p. 284). Thus, it can be helpful for a creative assignment to also include a presentation or critically reflective paper in order to facilitate the elucidation of the student's understanding and experience with the creative process and content.

I have observed a marked difference in student confidence about these assignments as the semester progresses. Rather than trying to discretely hide their creative work, as is common towards the beginning of the course, students express pride and can articulate their profound learning:

> *Even though at first they seemed like easy assignments, they made you have to DIG DEEP!!*

> *It surprised me that these assignments involved so much critical thinking!*

> *These assignments help to keep our minds open.*

> *I learned that I am capable of thinking deeply and being a more creative person than I originally thought.*

The primary intention of this paper is to stimulate other educators to explore the potential of introducing creative assignments into their practice. There is ample evidence of students' enthusiasm, growth, and personal empowerment throughout the paper. As noted earlier, some students'

initial responses to these assignments were incredulous. While at first seen by some as simplistic, student surveys and my own observations have corroborated their value and encouraged me to continue developing and implementing them. Whether this transformative learning potential is due primarily to the creative aspect of these assignments,or the result of a combination of ingredients including creativity calls for further research.

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Biography

Nicky Duenkel is an Assistant Professor in the Community Studies Department at Cape Breton University. Her current teaching and research interests focus on the co-creation of transformative learning environments; the potential for action research methodologies to foster profound personal, social, and ecological change; and exploring the relationship between contemplative pedagogy and transformative learning.