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Sing, O Muse: On the Link Between Creativity and Self-Directed Education

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Abstract

This article explores the connection between self-directed education and creativity. Creativity is characterized as having the ability to produce ideas or creations that are innovative, original, and imaginative. Self-directed education refers to a type of education in which what, where, and how a student learns is chosen by the student, rather than strictly following a predetermined curriculum. There are currently three primary means of self-directed education: unschooling, democratic schools, and free schools. This article discusses five ways in which the concepts of creativity and self-directed education overlap. These connections are: the connection between life and learning, the crucial role of play and experimentation, increased personal autonomy, a strong sense of personal initiative, and an egalitarian social structure.

Key words: self-directed education, creativity, unschooling, democratic schools, free schools, life learning

Introduction

The inspiration for this article came in the form of a deceptively simple question: is there a connection between creativity and self-directed education? From my personal experience as a homeschooler, I was tempted to immediately answer with a resounding yes. Having the freedom to focus on topics of interest has and continues to be a source of immense joy, which ultimately has led me to my career as a professional musician and music educator. However, as I delved deeper into this question, I realized that there was much more to this issue than I initially realized. Firstly, the terms 'creativity' and 'self-directed education' are not exactly easy to define or to measure, being that a core tenet of both is that they defy conventional metrics of standardization. Secondly, I realized that given the flexibility of both terms, it would be very difficult to come to a purely quantitative conclusion. As a result, I have done my best to define creativity and self-directed education by starting with a dictionary definition and then corroborating it with scholarly research on the main tenets of each term. In addition, I have chosen to focus on three forms of self-directed education: unschooling, democratic schools, and free schools. When discussing democratic schools and free schools, I mainly discuss the Sudbury Valley School and the Summerhill School, respectively. I have chosen to do this because these schools are among the most well-known and well-documented schools of their kind, and because the philosophy of both schools adequately represents the main tenets of self-directed education.

Creativity

The Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary defines creativity as "the ability to produce original and unusual ideas, or to make something new or imaginative" (Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary, n.d.) Within this definition, the concept of creativity encompasses two main

components: ideas and creation, both of which need to exhibit characteristics such as novelty, originality, and innovation. Of course, how these attributes are measured is somewhat subjective, and ultimately depend on the broader historical and cultural context in which they are utilized. E.P. Torrance viewed creativity as an amalgamation of traits such as sensitivity to problems or gaps, finding where the difficulty lies, looking for solutions, making and testing hypotheses, and sharing their results. Torrance (1965) observes that the creative process "describes a natural human process" (p. 664). Similarly, Sternberg (2006) and Lubart's Investment Theory of Creativity (1991, 1995) posits that "creative people are those who are willing and able to buy low and sell high in the realm of ideas" (p. 87). In other words, those who are creative are able to tap into previously unknown or unpopular ideas with potential, have the tenacity to persist despite resistance, and bring the given idea to success. According to Sternberg (2006), creativity involves six traits or attributes: intellectual skills, knowledge, thinking styles, personality, motivation, and environment (Sternberg, 2006, pp. 88-90). Sternberg views intellectual skills as having three dimensions: synthetic (viewing things or ideas from a new perspective), analytic (figuring out which ideas are worth working on), and practical (the skill of persuading people of the validity and worth of their ideas) (Sternberg, 2006, p. 88). More recently, Ken Robinson (2006) has brought increased awareness of the value of creativity in his highly popular TED Talk "Do Schools Kill Creativity?" In this talk, Robinson defines creativity as "the process of having original ideas that have value" (Robinson, 2006, 12:45). Robinson, like Torrance, also views creativity as an innate component of humanity, stating that "we don't grow into creativity, we grow out of it" (Robinson, 2006, 5:54). Interestingly, in his article *Biological Foundations for Self-Directed Education*, Gray (2016) states that there are four evolutionary drives in children:

curiosity, playfulness, sociability, and planfulness (p. 1). As we have seen, these traits, especially curiosity and playfulness, are vitally important elements of creativity. If this is true, then creativity is not something that we need to learn how to achieve; instead, it is an integral part of what it means to be human.

Self-Directed Education

Although this dictionary does not have a single entry for self-directed education, there are separate entries for the concepts "self-directed" and "education" that are useful for our purposes. Being self-directed is defined as "making your own decisions and organizing your own work rather than being told what to do by managers, teachers, etc." (Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary, n.d.), and education is defined as "the process of teaching and learning, or the organizations such as schools where this process happens" (Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary, n.d.). According to this combined (and by no means exclusive) definition of self-directed education, this form of education affects four dimensions of life: making decisions, taking responsibility for your work without external direction, teaching, and learning, which may or may not take place in a school. Additionally, Gray (2017) defines self-directed education as "all education that derives from a person's self-chosen activities, whether or not those activities are consciously directed toward education" (p. 1). Alternatives to conventional schooling abound throughout the world in a multitude of forms, such as unschooling, homeschooling, worldschooling, free schools, democratic schools, and alternative schools modeled on the educational philosophy of a school's founder, such as the Sudbury Valley School, Summerhill School, Montessori Schools, and Waldorf Schools. However, the vast majority of approaches to

self-directed education currently fall under the umbrella of unschooling, democratic schools, and free schools (Gray, 2017).

Unschooling

The term unschooling was coined by John Holt in the 1970's and is essentially a subcategory of homeschooling, with the difference that unschoolers tend to utilize significantly less formal curriculum than their homeschooled peers, instead focusing on learning through life (Gray & Riley, 2013). Instead of 'teaching' their children in the conventional sense, unschooling parents act as facilitators who answer questions, model behavior, and create a supportive, learning-filled environment (Priesnitz, 1). As Gray and Riley (2013) note, "many unschoolers see unschooling as a lifestyle rather than as a philosophy of education" (p**.** 3). Similarly, Patrick Farenga (2016), in his article *The Foundations of Unschooling*, states that "I broadly define unschooling as allowing your children as much freedom to explore the world around them in their own ways as you can comfortably bear" (p. 1) and later notes that "self-directed education is the key element for unschooling to occur" (p. 1). In short, unschooling is a highly personalized and flexible approach to education that features an interconnectedness between life and learning, increased autonomy, time and space to play and explore interests, and a supportive environment. As a result, it is difficult to arrive at a definitive definition of unschooling, as it is an approach to education that allows for much variability; some unschoolers may loosely follow a curriculum, while others will not use a curriculum in any capacity.

Democratic Schools and Free Schools

Democratic Schools and Free schools share many similarities: both types of schools encourage play, individuality, exploration, and flexibility, and utilize a much looser instructional

style than most public or private schools. Democratic schools are a type of school that is modeled after the political structure of democracy. Decisions about everything from school policies, allocation of school resources, and even the hiring and firing of staff members are made by both the students and the teachers, with each person's vote counting the same. While democratic schools are structured in a way that is similar to a democracy, free schools tend to emphasize a deliberate rejection of corporate capitalism and institutional authority in favor of a culture of love and freedom (Miller, 2002, p. 3). While there are many democratic and free schools in existence, arguably the most well-documented and well-known free schools and democratic schools are, respectively, Summerhill School and Sudbury Valley School. The Summerhill School has its roots in England and was founded by A.S. Neill in 1921. This school has classes at set times, but does not require the students to attend the classes. The Summerhill ethos is centered on the concepts of education being character building as well as informative, emphasizing the individuality of each student, and facilitating creativity (Lay, 2014). According to the schools' founder, A.S. Neill, a core value of the school is "to make the school fit the child, and not to make the child fit the school" (Lay, 2014, p. 543). By contrast, Sudbury Valley School was founded in 1968 in Massachusetts by Daniel Greenberg, and features a less structured approach than that of Summerhill. At Sudbury Valley School, there is not a set schedule of classes unless students ask for them. The school rules are decided by weekly school meetings in which everyone has one vote, regardless if they are kindergarten age or a longtime staff member. As long as the students do not break any of the school rules or do anything illegal, they are free to play, explore, and otherwise work on tasks that interest them. Teachers help answer students' questions and assist students if asked, but do not 'teach' in the strict sense of the word. The

emphasis is on learning through play, conversation, and curiosity. As Gray (2008) states in his article *Children Educate Themselves IV: Lessons from Sudbury Valley*, learning "occurs as a side effect of student's self-directed play and exploration" (p. 1).

Where does Creativity and Self-Directed Education Overlap?

As we have seen, the possession and expression of creativity is of course by no means limited to those who have been unschooled or have attended a school that can be categorized as a democratic or free school. Creativity is an attribute that, rather than being for the select few, is an inextricable element of humanity (Gray, 2016; Torrance, 1965). That being said, there is a significant overlap between the main tenets of creativity and the main tenets of self-directed education. In particular, there are five elements of self-directed education that overlap with the concept of creativity: the connection between life and learning, the crucial role of play and experimentation, increased personal autonomy, a strong sense of personal initiative, and an egalitarian social structure.

The Connection Between Life and Learning

Both creativity and self-directed education have a way of defying categorization, and the philosophies regarding the intersection of life and learning in self-directed education are no different. Those who pursue self-directed education generally do not believe that there is a significant difference between living and learning, and many see life and learning as interconnected (Gray, 2017). In unschooling, students learn from living life in the real world-a world where they interact and work with people of all ages, abilities, and socioeconomic backgrounds. At schools for self-directed education, such as Summerhill or Sudbury, students are able for the most part to explore their interests both during school hours and at home, with

the result that there is not a clearly demarcated distinction between everyday life and learning activities. Instead, life and learning are one and the same, and one does not need to go to a classroom to learn any more so than one needs to be a legal age adult in order to live life. This connection between learning and life encourages creativity, as much research shows that it is crucial for those working on creative ideas or creations to have the ability to make connections between disciplines and to think in unconventional ways (Sternberg, 2006; Torrance, 1965), something that is among the core principles of self-directed education.

Play and Experimentation

This interconnection between life and learning leads to the second characteristic of both creativity and self-directed education: people who work and learn in creative ways will often learn by play and experimentation (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006; Vandenberg, 1980). This is, to some degree, not surprising; creativity involves ideas and creation, both of which tend to be results of play and increased freedom. However, it is important to carefully define what is meant by play in this context. Mainstream society tends to view play as the antithesis of work; play and work are two very different activities. Interestingly, this is the diametric opposite of how highly creative people or people involved with self-directed education view play. Self-directed learning gives people the time and space to think and experiment, thereby learning about themselves, the world, and their place in it. This is also substantiated by Sternberg, who notes that "creativity and thinking in novel ways are facilitated when people are willing to put in up-front time to think in new ways" (Sternberg, 2006, p. 88) From an evolutionary perspective, play is not something light or trivial; it is one of the traits that makes us human (Gray 2017, pp. 3-7). Unschooling, democratic schooling, and free schooling allow the student more time, space, and freedom to

experiment, think, ask questions, and try to answer these questions without being shamed or punished if it turns out that some of their ideas are incorrect or misguided. As Ken Robinson stated in his TED Talk, "if you're not prepared to be wrong, you'll never come up with anything original" (Robinson, 2006, 5:10).

As a result, many of those who attended a democratic or free school or unschooled choose careers in adulthood that are extensions of what they were interested in during their childhood (Gray, 2008). One of the core differences between self-directed education and conventional education is that in self-directed education, learning and creating are seen as two components of the same process, while in public school you learn whatever is taught with the goal of having the knowledge to create the thing later. Often much later. As Alfie Kohn notes, "people learn to make decisions by making them, not following directions" (Kohn, 1993, p. 1).

Personal Autonomy

The presence of personal autonomy is a crucial component of encouraging creativity to flourish. As Torrance stated, one of the most gratifying aspects of his work as a researcher has been to see that "different kinds of children learn best when given opportunities to learn in ways best suited to their motivations and abilities" (Torrance, 1965, p. 678). All of the primary types of Self-directed education emphasizes the crucial nature of personal autonomy, and as a result the school (or, in the case of unschooling, home) environments are structured in a way that everyone is free to learn in ways that work best for them. In most cases, unschooling is characterized by a radically autonomous environment in which people can choose how, when, and where to learn. As a participant in Gray and Riley's study on grown unschoolers noted, unschooling involves "the freedom to do and learn as you wish, as long as it was not harmful to

yourself and others" (Gray & Riley, 2013, p. 17). Daniel Greenberg founded Sudbury on the premise that the school should accommodate the child rather than the child having to adjust to the school (Lay, 2014, p. 543), one of the founding principles of A.S. Neill's Summerhill School was "to give children a free learning space to stimulate their creative thinking" (Lay, 2013, p. 542), and countless unschooling parents chose unschooling as an educational option in which they could allow their children greater autonomy and control over their lives (Grunzke, 2010).

Personal Initiative

Another trait of both creativity and self-directed education is the concept of taking personal initiative. Highly creative people often think in unconventional ways, pursue projects that are not endorsed by mainstream society, and must prove the validity of their ideas to broader public who are often initially skeptical. Examples of this abound from history. For instance, Galileo's landmark discovery that earth and the other planets in our solar system revolve around the sun debunked the previously held belief that all the planets revolved around the earth. This resulted in condemnation from the church and house arrest for Galileo for the remainder of his life, and that was only after he recanted (Zax, 2009, p. 1). Galileo's story of taking personal initiative, sharing his discovery, and ultimately suffering for it is by no means unique among highly creative people. In Sternberg's observations on personality traits that are associated with creativity, he notes that "one has to be willing to stand up to conventions if one wants to think and act in creative ways" (Sternberg, 2006, p. 89). Standing up to previously accepted views takes personal initiative, something that is recognized and highly valued across the main types of self-directed education. When founding his Sudbury School, Greenberg made a conscious effort to move away from the concept of a curriculum in order for the students to have a strong drive to

learn and take responsibility for themselves and their community (Greenberg, 1995). In their survey of 75 Grown Unschoolers, Riley and Gray (2014) found that 75 percent cited self-motivation and self-direction as one of the advantages of unschooling (Gray & Riley, 2015, p. 21). In A.S. Neill's Summerhill school, Neill strove to create an environment where the individual has "freedom to choose, learn, and grow up" (Lay, 2014, p. 544). When there is none or very little formal curriculum, students learn to think for themselves, find projects that they enjoy working on, share their findings, and refine accordingly, all the while taking initiative instead of waiting for someone else to tell them what to do.

An Egalitarian Social Structure

Finally, all forms of self-directed education entail a less top-down and more egalitarian social structure. In this environment, teachers and parents act as facilitators who are there to help, nurture, care for, and have conversations with their students about topics of interest. This is one of the cornerstones of self-directed education; in order to engage in play and experimentation while also developing personal initiative in an environment that encourages autonomy, there needs to be a more equal balance of power and authority than is typically associated with more conventional schools. Sudbury Valley School, Summerhill School, and similar schools are structured democratically. Each person has one vote, regardless of their age or social status in mainstream society (Gray, 2017). This allows for the teachers and students to have a person to person relationship rather than a one up-one down relationship, which significantly changes the environment of the school towards one in which it is okay to experiment, make mistakes, learn from those mistakes, play, ask questions, and learn from each other. In other words, self-directed education involves creating a learning environment that encourages creativity, not conformity.

Unschooling parents do not replicate the environment of school at home, enforce a curriculum, or test their children. Like teachers at democratic or free schools, they provide a safe environment for children to learn what they want to learn and in which they can find, explore, and refine their interests (Gray & Riley, 2013). This type of environment sets the stage for students to fully express their creative potential. Having "an environment that is supportive and rewarding of creative ideas" (Sternberg, 2006, p. 89) is an integral aspect of creativity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, creativity refers to one's ability to come up with ideas and creations that are innovative, original and imaginative. Torrance viewed creativity as an amalgamation of traits including sensitivity to problems, finding where there is difficulty, looking for solutions, making and testing hypotheses, and sharing the results of their work. Sternberg's Investment Theory of Creativity posits that highly creative people tend to have certain traits. These include intellectual skills, knowledge, thinking styles, personalities that are willing to challenge conventional wisdom and persevere despite challenges, intrinsic motivation, and a supportive environment.

As its name implies, self-directed education refers to an educational perspective that gives the student ample opportunity to make decisions, take responsibility for themselves and their work without external direction, a more egalitarian approach to teaching and learning. Self-directed education may or may not take place in a school. Broadly speaking, there are three types of self-directed education: unschooling, democratic schools and free schools. Unschooling involves an inextricable connection between life and learning, and the use of little or no formal curriculum. In unschooling, parents act more as facilitators than teachers, providing a safe and supportive environment and allowing their children to explore their interests in a way that is

congruent with their preferred ways and means of learning. Democratic schools are structured in a way that is similar to American democracy. Each person (whether they are a student or a teacher) has one vote, and all votes count the same. Democratic schools also allow for a large amount of freedom to explore interests and plenty of unstructured time for play. Free schools are similar to democratic schools in the sense that they also offer the student ample freedom to play, explore, and learn about topics of interest. However, while democratic schools operate within a democratic structure, free schools (at least in theory) eschew formal structure altogether, opting instead for an environment of freedom, love, and a conscious rejection of capitalism and other conventional means of external authority.

In my analysis of the relationship between creativity and self-directed education, I have found five ways in which the creativity and self-directed education overlap: the connection between life and learning, play and experimentation, personal autonomy, personal initiative, and a more egalitarian social structure. Self-directed education often features an environment in which learning and life are synonymous, rather than being compartmentalized into separate categories. This environment is also conducive to play and experimentation, which leads to an enduring sense of personal autonomy and initiative. In other words, the traditional top-down teacher-student hierarchy is tipped on its head in favor of a significantly more egalitarian student-teacher relationship that is grounded in trust, respect, and autonomy.

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