

Teaching Creativity in American Colleges and Universities : Faculty Perceptions of Course Goals, Assignments, and Focus of Evaluation*

Lynda Baloché (West Chester University)

Kay S. Bull , Diane Montgomery (Oklahoma State University)

In July of 1990, approximately fifty teachers of creativity meet at the Alden B. Dow Creativity Center, of the Northwood Institute in Midland, Michigan, for the First National Conference on Creativity in American Colleges and Universities. This conference, prompted by the work of McDonoug and McDonough(1987), was an exciting opportunity for university level teachers of creativity to gateher and talk about what they believed, what they taught, and how they taught. To facilitate discussing, and as a gesture of open sharing, most participants brought with them copies of their course syllavi.

At this first conference, considerable, and sometimes heated, discussion focused on overall course goals, the experiences, projects, and products "required" as assignments in courses, and the evaluation of these requirements. While the diversity of opinion of those present soon became clear, many participants were left questioning if the opinions heard and syllabi offered at this conference were representative of what was being done nationally. The present study is born from that question.

* Presented at the Second National Conference on Creativity in American Colleges and Universities, Midland, Michigan July, 1991

Population and Methodology

To augment syllabi collected at the conference, letters were mailed requesting additional syllabi. Lists used for this mailing included addresses gathered from the original McDonough list and ones supplied by the Alden B. Dow Creativity Center and the Creativity Division of the National Association for Gifted Children. As a result, a total of 67 syllabi were collected from creativity courses taught at 61 colleges and universities in the United States. These courses ran the gamut from freshman to doctoral level and represented courses in education, business, psychology, engineering, the arts, and more. All the syllabi were examined by the researchers to determine, among other things, what was taught and what was evaluated. Results of this analysis were used to structure a questionnaire that was sent to 305 individuals who were thought to teach courses in creativity. Of the 147 questionnaires returned, 101 were from individuals who actually taught creativity at the college level. Table 1 contains a directory of the colleges where these courses are taught.

In addition to demographic data, the questionnaire itself consisted of five sections, each of which utilized a Likert* type scale to gather opinions from respondents. The first three sections, the subject of the present paper, were as follows: section 1: Given the ever-present reality of evaluation in most courses taught in American colleges and universities, Section 1 asked respondents to react to five statements regarding the evaluation of creativity in a creativity course. Section 2: Since the researchers suspected that basic course goals varied considerably, this section asked respondents to react to a series of statements describing potential course goals. Section 3: Following up on interest expressed at the 1990 conference, the third

section, which had two parts, dealt with the experiences, projects, and products "required" in courses. A total of 17 products and experiences, each of which had been gleaned from the reading of course syllabi, were listed.

Respondents were asked to rate how important each of these items was to improving student creativity and also how important each of these items was to the understanding of creativity and the creative process.

Results and Discussion

As indicated in Table 2, respondents felt that the most important or appropriate focus for evaluation was to evaluate students on their understanding of issue related to creativity. And although respondents generally felt creativity could be evaluated and could be taught, they were less likely to agree that student products should be evaluated for creativity or that the overall creativity of their students should be tested or evaluated during a creativity course.

As shown in Table 3, respondents identified providing "a climate in which students feel safe and free to explore their own creativity" as the number one goal for a course in creativity.

Following closely on this goal is the goal to improve the creativity of individual students by providing them with the opportunity to participate in creative experiences and experiences which use some kind of creativity technique(s). Respondents differentiate experience from direct instruction, rating, as a course goal, the improvement of creativity through instruction lower than improvement through experience. When asked how important increasing understanding of creativity and the creative process was to course goals, participants

ranked the psychological understanding of creativity third behind the goal of providing a safe climate and providing experiences which were designed to improve the creativity of individual students.

Table 4 indicated how important respondents thought each of 17 products was to improving creativity and to understanding creativity. Keeping a journal or notebook, teaching or demonstrating creative problem solving, making a creativity exercises were rated most highly (lathough not necessarily in that order) for both improving creativity and understanding creativity. Scoring a creativity test was considered both least likely to improve creativity and also least likely to facilitate the understanding of creativity. Many of the seventeen items were rated more likely to facilitate the understanding of creativity than to actually improve the creativity of students. Notable among these were conducting research, writing an article or paper, making a report, reviewing a creativity book, and performing an analysis of creativity in a profession. In general it appears that the respondents felt that the most common assignments in creativity courses are more likely to facilitate understanding than they are to actually improve creativity.

When conceptualizing a course and writing a syllabus, whether in creativity or another field, it is common to formulate a goal or set of goals, develop experiences and assignments that are designed to help achieve these goals, and evaluate students based on their achievement relative to these goals. In a sense, the goal becomes both the center and the framework around and within which the course is woven. While the weaving of goals, activities and assignments, and evaluation is possible(although by no means straight-forward) in a single course, it is interesting to speculate about the

possibility of a common thread in the aggregate of responses presented here.

As with a single course, it seems to be most logical to begin with goals. Again, the number one goal for the respondents was to provide an climate in which students felt safe and free to explore their own creativity. This goal was followed by improving creativity through experience and participation, increasing psychological understanding of the creative process, and improving creativity through direct instruction. The majority of assignments commonly found in course syllabi were seen to relate most directly to the third goal—that of increasing understanding. And while most assignments were related to the understanding of creativity, likewise the number one priority for evaluation was to evaluate how well students understand creativity related issues. Therefore it seems that the kinds of assignments faculty require are indeed consistent with what they feel they should evaluate.

How, or does, the first goal “fit in” to beliefs about evaluation and course requirements? The goal of providing a safe climate is well grounded in the literature (Rogers 1961, Torrance 1963, Maslow 1976) and in fact is, by some, linked specifically to a lack of extrinsic evaluation (Rogers 1961, Torrance 1961) while an absence of extrinsic evaluation is frequently seen as a key factor in the development of the type of intrinsic motivation most often associated with creativity (Rogers 1961, Crutchfield 1962, Maslow 1968, Deci 1975, Amabile 1983). It seems consistent with the goal of providing a safe climate that although respondents for the most part agreed that creativity could be evaluated that, in fact, they were somewhat less eager to actually evaluate the creativity of their students in

the context of a course. Likewise, it also seems consistent that most of the assignments required (and therefore presumably evaluated in some manner) were seen as less important in terms of developing creativity than in terms of understanding—it seems that perhaps people are more hesitant to give assignments that they feel they need to evaluate for creativity. Perhaps evaluating understanding is seen as preferable, in much the same way that Amabile (1983) suggests that evaluation with a technical focus—the evaluation of “technical goodness”—is preferable to evaluation with a creative focus—the evaluation of creativity itself.

Conclusion

The results of this study, in the aggregate, indicate a degree of consistency in the description of goals, experiences, assignments, and evaluation procedures values by university faculty who teach courses in creativity. This description seems to reflect an experiential /humanistic orientation to teaching—an orientation that rates safety and experience over direct instruction and evaluation. Faculty who resonate with these values might use the data presented here to aid themselves in an examination of their own particular course goals, experiences, assignments, and evaluation procedures to see how these mirror those described. For faculty who conceptualize their courses quite differently, this article might serve a very similar purpose—as a invitation for reflection on how goals, experience, and evaluation are linked. Whatever the orientation, such a reflection is likely to be valuable, since pedagogically, linkage of goals, experience, and evaluation are critical to both the vitality of individual courses and to the vitality of creativity as an area of study in the university setting.

References

- Amabile, T. M. (1983). *The social psychology of creativity*. New York : Springer-Verlag.
- Crutchfield, R. (1962). Conformity and creative thinking. In *Contemporary Approaches to creativity Thinking*, Edited by H. Gruber, G. Terrel, and M. Wertheimer. New York : Atherton.
- Deci, E. (1975). *Intrinsic motivation*. New York : Plenum.
- Maslow, A. H. (1968). Music, education and peak experience. *Documentary Report of the Tanglewood Symposium*. Washington, DC : Music Educators National Conference.
- Maslow, A. H. (1976). *The farther reaches of human nature*. New York : Penguin.
- McDonough, P., & McDonough, B. (1987). A survey of American colleges and universities on the conducting of formal courses in creativity. *Journal of creative Behavior*, 21(4), 271-282.
- Prince, G. M. (1970). *The practice of creativity*. New York : Harper & Row.
- Rogers, C. M. (1961). *On becoming a person : A therapist's view of psychotherapy*. Boston : Houghton Mifflin.
- Torrance, E. P. (1961). Give the "Devil" his dues. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 5, 115-118.
- Torrance, E. P. (1963). Toward the more humane education of gifted children. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 6, 71-75.