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INTRODUCTION

Early in my career as a teacher of senior art, when I had large classes, I talked myself out of using one-on-one formative assessment and feedback strategies, such as conferencing, to advance creative thinking, because I figured I simply did not have the time. Furthermore, I wondered what the other students would do when I was speaking with individuals about their work. How could I make sure all students completed my assignments and cared for my art materials when I was working with a single student? So, in the beginning, I skipped conferences, simply assigned student artwork a summative grade, and called it a day. However, I began to change my mind as the years progressed.

The turning point happened in a senior art class. I sensed that some of my quieter and more reluctant students were connecting with a painting unit I was teaching on watercolor painting. As they built confidence and technique, I had the urge to speak to some of them about what they were experiencing. So, I began to conference with my students. I structured an activity that invited independent exploration, and I let the learners know that I wanted to speak with them individually about their ongoing efforts. I made sure every student was able to work on his or her own and then I began calling students, one at a time, out into the hallway, where I had hung their work.

I began by asking them which aspect of their work gave them the most pride, based on the skills we had been practicing. I followed with a question about which part of their work most surprised them. I then asked them what they might do differently if they could have another try at the painting on the wall. The conversations were organic, productive, and criterion referenced. I learned so much about my students and their thinking. I also found the space and time to honor their learning. This was so powerful.

I especially remember a session I had with a particular student. He was definitely one of the quietest in my class, and he was a year older than the other students in the room. School was not a place where he experienced tremendous success, and I had the

sense that he was just trying to graduate so he could get on with “real life.” I believe he enrolled in my elective course because he thought it would get him one credit closer to graduation (and it did). He was always unfailingly polite but very reserved. I am not sure I could have told you much about him as a person, even after having him in my class for a month.

When he joined me in the hallway for his conference, he looked a little terrified, unsure of what was going to happen. I began by expressing how grateful I was for his efforts in trying a new kind of painting. He honestly looked as if hearing a positive comment like this was a completely foreign experience—he immediately smiled and began to talk about how interested he was in the quality of watercolor paint. Our conversation flowed from that point on, and he easily reflected on his processes and set goals for his next piece. What struck me the most was the power of a formative assessment and feedback session when in the hands of this learner. He shared more in those ten minutes than I heard from him in the preceding month, and our conversation ignited his creativity as he began to plan his next art piece. It completely confirmed my suspicion that assessment’s role is to motivate and inspire. Most of all, it reminded me of the importance of student voice in the learning and assessment process. It is a lesson that has never left me.

Too many classrooms stifle, push down, or lock up creativity. Students receive assignments with little or no room to express themselves or explore their options; this lack of options locks them into stagnant routines. The implications of this stagnation in a classroom setting are immense. Without creativity and assessment processes that truly nurture inquiry and growth, we end up with systems filled with compliance and “right” answers. We run the risk of eliminating multiple viewpoints, critical thinking, and deep connections by rewarding the systematic movement of learners through prescriptive content. Teachers want more for students—we want students to feel the grit of learning; the struggle and challenge; the recursive nature of rich, authentic learning. We want them to feel the power of making their own decisions, the challenges when those decisions do not yet yield the hoped-for results, and the pride when they give students exactly what they wanted. We want students to recognize the power of revision, of returning to ideas more than once in order to deepen and extend thinking.

When we introduce creativity into all classroom settings, we unlock the potential for profound learning and development of valuable life skills. We can use creativity to teach resilience, to foster imagination, and to nurture stamina. We can invite students into processes that encourage them to see problems and topics from multiple perspectives. We can use creativity to reinforce critical thinking alongside curiosity and wonder. Creativity, and the assessment that supports it, encourages students to broaden their idea generation and revisit assumptions. Pete Hall and Alisa Simeral (2015) remind us, “The most successful individuals today are those who have the ability to reflect—those

who are aware of what they know, recognize that what they know is always subject to change, and have the ability to undo and relearn knowledge. Therefore, they are able to revise their belief systems” (p. 47). Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (2005) go on to clarify the importance of the kinds of assessment that unlock creativity: “Self-understanding is arguably the most important facet of understanding for lifelong learning. Central to self-understanding is an honest self-assessment, based on increasing clarity about what we do understand and what we don’t; what we have accomplished and what remains to be done” (pp. 215–216). The development of our learners into thinking human beings depends on the presence of creativity in our classrooms.

About This Book

The purpose of this book is to offer very tangible ways we can use assessment processes to unlock creativity in any classroom at any grade level. The kind of assessment I will describe in each chapter purposefully invites learners right into the middle of creative decisions by simultaneously inviting them right into the middle of assessment.

Assessment is the key that unlocks the creative potential so many students have learned to suppress in school, are unaware they possess, or over time have convinced themselves never existed at all. When we embed assessment within the creative process, it invites students to consider decisions they are making in relation to personally meaningful goals. It invites us, as their teachers, to observe their progress and the actions they are taking so we can respond carefully.

When we decide to develop creativity within our classrooms, we may feel the pull between the messiness of exploration and the desire to protect both our own and our students’ sense of self-worth and need for control. We face the challenge of deciding what kind of feedback to offer every time a student shares a product with us; of determining to what degree we are going to ask him or her to re-enter the creative process, and to what degree we are going to let students make those decisions on their own. This process is complex and recursive, and we might not be familiar with this kind of complexity, this degree of revision, and this shift in the conversations we have about learning in our school system. Students, in turn, are used to a particular way of doing business when at school and often work on the premise of needing to get things done and complete tasks quickly. For this reason, if we are going to develop creativity in our classrooms, we need embedded assessment processes that help both teachers and students navigate the messiness of creativity. In making creativity flourish in our classrooms, we may first have to reconsider our assessment decisions and methods and examine how best to invite the kinds of assessment that actually support creativity in our learners.

Creativity and Assessment

Part of the challenge of this work rests in how we understand creativity—what it is, how it works, and how it is reflected in all areas of life. We can say the same for assessment. We may have two misunderstandings compounded exponentially and, as a result, both are sold incredibly short in our education system. Misunderstanding breeds misuse or omission. This is not only unfortunate but also outright dangerous. Educational psychologist Joseph S. Renzulli (2000) agrees, stating:

The sad fact remains that in spite of dozens of books about creativity, hundreds of research studies, and thousands of training programs and workshops, the development of creative potential is still largely an ignored aspect of a child's total repertoire of acquired behaviors. (p. 15)

Without creativity developed using strong assessment processes, we cannot hope to develop learners who become deep thinkers, critical consumers, and empathic human beings.

Daniel Pink (2009) reminds us:

We know—if we've spent time with young children or remember ourselves at our best—that we're not destined to be passive and compliant. We're designed to be active and engaged. And we know that the richest experiences in our lives aren't when we're clamoring for validation from others, but when we're listening to our own voice—doing something that matters, doing it well, and doing it in the service of a cause larger than ourselves. (p. 145)

I cannot overstate the importance of engaging in creative experiences that encourage this active engagement and passionate pursuit of meaning. Getting there, however, may require us to reimagine our ideas about creativity and assessment.

Reimagining Creativity

Being creative can be messy, unpredictable, and downright uncomfortable. It takes time and an unrelenting persistence in working toward desired outcomes, regardless of the cost. It cannot be packaged and sold in sterile boxes, locked away from the real lives of our students. That being said, educators must acknowledge that regularly engaging in creative processes and the assessment that supports this way of doing business takes tremendous courage, as Joan Franklin Smutny, founder and director of the Center for Gifted, and her colleague S. E. von Fremd (2009) assert:

Creative self-expression in its most basic elements determines how life is experienced, how problems are perceived, how duties are performed, how instruments are played, and how visions are realized. It demands openness and spontaneity, as well as the courage to fend off unreceptive responses of hard-nosed or narrow-minded thinking. (p. 293)

This runs contrary to the design of our education system. Timelines and deadlines rule the day, and making time for discomfort and mess is unpalatable and seemingly impossible for many. However, the cost of not doing so is far greater. An education system void of creativity and the kinds of reflective and self-directed assessment that support it is a system that will fail to nurture learners' long-term emotional, intellectual, and social needs. It is a system that limits the potential of not only students and teachers but also the societies of which they are a part. As education scholar Katie F. Olivant (2015) shares, "A dichotomy has developed between what societies need from education and that which the education system is providing" (p. 115). Without creativity and the kind of assessment that fully supports it, we cannot hope to develop citizens who look for new solutions to problems, who innovate in the face of challenge, and who explore their need for expression and wonder as a way to nurture their mental health. Even decades-old research by Carl R. Rogers (1954, 1961), Abraham H. Maslow (1954), and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) finds that doing creative work is one of the most significant experiences of a person's life. Our societies need more from an education system than simply revisiting information already discovered. Information is important, certainly, but inviting students to manipulate that information and reimagine it, revisit it, and build from it is critical for the health and growth of our societies as a whole.

To position the idea of creativity clearly in our thinking, consider the definition Sir Ken Robinson (2009) offers: "To be creative you actually have to do something. It involves putting your imagination to work to make something new, to come up with new solutions to problems, even to think of new problems or questions" (p. 63). Many people mistakenly believe creativity is limited to the arts, but Robinson's definition of creativity shows us that the creative processes exist in every field. Another misconception is that creativity belongs to the gifted and is the result of building something from nothing. In fact, creativity can occur in everyday moments by everyday people. For example, during meal preparation, when a cook adds new ingredients to a tried-and-true recipe, he or she is exhibiting creativity, or when an adolescent tries a new strategy while playing a video game, he or she is taking a creative risk. Looking at existing ideas in new ways is a creative act. Imagining a new perspective or mode of expressing an idea that already exists is a creative event. Creativity is the fuel that drives exploration and wonder. Thinking in new ways, asking new questions, and imagining new outcomes advance all manner of learning. Olivant (2015) concurs:

Creativity is crucial to personal and cognitive growth and to academic success. It is a concept that continues to merit a central position in education but tends to fail to attain the appropriate attention and support of policymakers and education leaders. (p. 127)

Creativity is not simply about making something beautiful. Rather, it is about answering important questions, imagining possibilities, and solving challenging

problems. By shifting our understanding of creativity, we can reimagine its place within our classrooms.

Creativity, in this sense, is a harkening back to the kinds of learning we did naturally when we were young. Smutny and von Fremd (2009) describe how students have lost this learning over time:

The creative world they lived in during their earliest years of learning as they touched, tasted, performed, molded, constructed, expressed, and explored their surroundings has lost its validity. They had to let it go in order to ply the more serious waters of skill acquisition and content mastery. (p. 5)

However, this loss does not have to occur. We do not have to choose skill acquisition and content mastery over creativity. Creativity, skills, and knowledge can develop simultaneously. They are interdependent, with each serving to advance the other. Slight changes in the kinds of questions we ask and the manner of assessing in which we engage can propel creativity forward, with skill development and content mastery being integral parts of the creative process. This is truly a win-win situation for students.

Reimagining Assessment

As we begin this conversation, just as we need to share a common understanding of what *creativity* describes, it is important to be sure there is clarity about the term *assessment* as it appears in this book. There are certainly enough definitions of this word to keep a teacher busy any day of the week. However, Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (2005) define assessment as “techniques used to analyze student accomplishments against specific goals and criteria” (p. 337). This definition is a great starting point for exploring the kinds of assessment processes critical to unlocking creativity.

In order to develop our understanding more fully, let’s imagine the word *techniques* in Wiggins and McTighe’s (2005) definition is interchangeable with the word *processes*. In *Unlocked: Assessment as the Key to Everyday Creativity in the Classroom*, we will explore a number of assessment processes a teacher can apply each and every day to develop learners’ creative potential. These include, but are not limited to:

- ◇ Daily formative assessment
- ◇ Self-assessment
- ◇ Peer assessment
- ◇ Constructive and targeted feedback
- ◇ Goal setting
- ◇ Long-term reflection and criteria setting

Through these processes, educators can nurture critical skills such as striving to seek new solutions, building stamina for multiple attempts, and developing strategies to engage in purposeful revision for each and every learner.

The word *analyze* is also critical in our understanding of assessment, because by analyzing artifacts of student thinking, we as educators can ask further questions, consider options, and make decisions about next steps. It is important to be clear about the criteria against which we measure success and challenge, and the act of analyzing performances and products is an essential part of the creative process. The key is to realize that students could conduct this analysis just as often as teachers could. When both teacher and student undertake the analysis, they deepen thinking and support the opportunity for further exploration.

The last part of this definition that needs some attention is the phrase *against specific goals and criteria*. Both goals and criteria for success are critical for learning and expressing oneself creatively. Students must ultimately own the goals and criteria, and teachers can use the forms of assessment in the preceding list to guide them in setting and reflecting on progress toward those goals.

Engaging in assessment processes that advance and nurture this kind of personal meaning making and creative exploration for students will ensure that we protect both assessment and creativity, not as add-ons, but as major players in new kinds of learning within our schools. In fact, deeply considering the relationship between assessment and creativity is the key to maximizing their potential and developing the very human beings who engage in these processes. Assessment and creativity are deeply and intimately connected and are critical to the development of enriching and complex learning experiences.

When working together, assessment and creativity have the potential to change the world both within and beyond the classroom. Together, creativity and assessment enhance the relationship between humans and their inner landscapes, fostering the search for new questions, new ideas, and new connections. They invite our students to think about solutions to problems greater than themselves and consider the needs of others and the world as a whole. When educators nurture creativity and assessment in their classrooms, they invite students to enhance the quality of their lives by moving past the mundane and the usual, and encourage them to look deeper, search wider, and explore multiple perspectives. When assessment fuels creativity, students move toward and through learning they didn't anticipate when they began. They set new goals and ask new questions, which move them in new directions. Without assessment, creativity stops, and without creativity, our classrooms stagnate, locked into routines.

While this book focuses on the kinds of assessment processes that move creativity and learning forward (formative assessment processes), it is important to note that assessment *of* learning, or summative assessment, is also part of the creative process.