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Uniting Creativity and Research: A Holistic Approach to Learning

Cover Page Footnote

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Uniting Creativity and Research: A Holistic Approach to Learning

Susan A. Schiller

In a standard liberal arts education, we have a long history of assigning more value to research than to creativity. When I use the word “research,” I am referring to the process of gathering primary and secondary sources that will support a hypothesis and/or that will be used to persuade others to a particular point of view. This process is seen in most disciplines except those such as art, music, drama, photography, and the like, where the creative process and the product arising out of it are valued for their freshness and newness. Aside from the so-called “artistic disciplines,” the high value for research is pervasive, and objective writing based on research tends to saturate the curriculum in a variety of forms. Although creative facets, such as idea generation and discovery of information, are embedded in research and typically occur in the planning stages, they are overshadowed by a goal to produce objective academic discourse as an outcome of the research process. Objectivity in written voice and information dominates the research process, and the use of creative elements is undervalued, discouraged, at times even penalized. Creativity becomes separated from research because of the way logic and objectivity are privileged. Such a separation creates a false dichotomy because research *requires* creativity.

The curricular design of required courses and elective courses further supports the separation of creativity and research. For example, in English departments composition is a university wide graduation requirement; creative writing is an elective (except in creative writing degree programs). The research process and/or the need to produce objective academic discourse drives composition courses, while the process of creativity drives creative writing courses. Within this standard curricular design, students learn to place a higher value on research than on creativity or on professions within the arts.

American culture generally perceives artistic careers to be less financially stable than careers in law, medicine, or business, choices that typically rely on linguistics and logic as the primary way of knowing. Logical ways of knowing are creative to a limited extent, but when logic is emphasized to a point that allows little or no space for other ways of knowing, students lose out. Over the years, their ability to rely on inner knowing or on intelligences other than logic is weakened or even lost. They lose their ability to be creative and misperceive creativity as a mysterious something or other that only a few gifted people display. Unfortunately, information, logic, and persuasion, the essential modes in research, still receive more value than creativity despite the work of Howard Gardner. Gardner’s work in multiple intelligences and in creativity studies is well established and has received general acceptance, but mainstream education still relies primarily on linguistic and logical mathematical ways of knowing (Noddings 31).

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We have yet to move closer to a holistic form of education, one that values creativity and research equally. An imbalance exists, but this can be changed through a holistic approach to learning. In this essay, I challenge educators to balance the scales between research and creativity, to embrace a holistic pedagogy, and to create opportunities for students to draw from the types of intelligences that best suit them.

Holistic educators believe that activating the whole person is necessary to initiate deep and permanent learning experiences. The learner's intellect, emotions, physical body, spirit, and social being are developed together rather than independently. An imbalance occurs in our development if we use one part and not the others. Inherent social and spiritual characteristics create context within which the mind, emotion, and body are integrated. Holistic educators use wholeness as a means through which to teach, and they create methods through which wholeness fosters our full awareness. Our inner and outer lives are no longer isolated but integrated so that we come to a meaningful understanding of our spirit, our soul. Within the rich context created by wholeness, one's spirit assumes a central and vital role because it is the source of motivation for growth and learning. It is no surprise then that the learner is not seen as an independent agent but rather as a part of the greater whole that includes the family, the community, the natural environment, and the universe (Rocha xi). All around the world today, explorative educators are turning to holism as a means to evoke and recover the spiritual center in learners—the center that motivates, awakens, enlivens, and instigates creativity, compassion, honesty, fairness, responsibility, and respect (Lantieri 6). The word “holistic” in this paper refers to this rich interconnected view of learning and being.

Activity in the field of creativity studies (what it is and how it works) has increased over the last 70 years and is generally dominated by psychology. Social, psychological, emotional, cultural, and biological factors are most often featured. Studies tend to fall into two categories: idiographic research that relies on individual case studies and nomothetic research that seeks discovery of general or universal laws that can be applied to all (Gardner, “The Creators” 143).¹ Howard Gardner's writing, attempting to construct a bridge that spans idiographic and nomothetic research, presents a more holistic perspective although he never explicitly accounts for the spiritual side of knowing. He stresses cognitive and developmental psychological frames that take into account social and motivational aspects of creativity, and he utilizes multiple intelligences he previously identified in *Frames of Mind* (linguistic, logical mathematical, spatial, musical, kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal). His creativity theory as articulated in his later book, *The Creators of the Modern Era*, is “inherently interdisciplinary” (“The Creators” 145), a feature that leans into holism. About his definition and approach, Gardner says:

1. I focus equally on problem solving, problem finding, and the creation of products, such as scientific theories, works of art, or the building of institutions.
2. I emphasize that all creative work occurs in one or more domains. Individuals are not creative (or noncreative) in

¹For a fuller view of creativity studies than this space allows, see Maragaret A. Boden's *Dimensions of Creativity*.

general; they are creative in particular domains of accomplishment and require the achievement of expertise in these domains before they can execute significant creative work.

3. No person, act, or product is creative or noncreative in itself. Judgments of creativity are inherently communal, relying heavily on individuals expert within a domain. (145)

Gardner's definition requires a broadening of perspective that lets us see that "creativity emerges in virtue of a dialectical process among *individuals* of talent, *domains* of knowledge and practices, and *fields* of knowledgeable judges" (146). His work further relies on two general positions: one, that people can develop all seven intelligences he has already identified, and, two, that creative people "are characterized particularly by a tension, or lack of fit, between the elements involved in a productive work" (146).² He labels this tension *fruitful asynchrony*, and says that it is "the conquering of these asynchronies that leads to the establishment of work that comes to be cherished" (146). In other words, fruitful asynchrony provides the initiating impulse for creativity.

Within my subject areas of English education, composition, and American literature, I design assignments that unite creativity and research because I see a reciprocity between them that is both complementary to and/or required by one another. I also believe that creativity can occur with or without assistance from research. When research is applied in creative endeavors, creativity is enhanced. However, research *cannot occur* without a degree of creativity.

I teach in a mainstream public state institution. Certain constraints are attached to this context. For example, I must use a syllabus, design assignments, evaluate students, assign grades, and so on. I am expected to achieve the teaching goals as stated on our departmental master syllabi. Fortunately, the institutional culture I am in encourages innovative teaching, and some of the master syllabi provide teachers with sufficient autonomy when designing pedagogy. Although I am not in a holistic school, I have been able to introduce holistic assignments with some success.

About six years ago I began replacing the standard research paper that typically ends a course with public presentations of creative projects. The three aspects in Gardner's definition for the creative process are met in the following ways:

- These assignments ask for a creation of a product, a work of art, or a pedagogical lesson plan (in other words, a solution to the problem of teaching a particular subject matter).
- The domain must remain within the subject matter of the course. The outcome of the project must demonstrate expertise of that domain. A synthesis of course material occurs, and its manifestation and demonstration are the primary goals of the project.
- The judgment of the product is controlled by the field—that is, by the audience, the teacher, and the institutional standards of excellence.

²In this study, Gardner goes on to use well known creators Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein, Pablo Picasso, Igor Stravinsky, T. S. Eliot, Martha Graham, and Mahatma Gandhi, each exemplifying at least one of the seven intelligences Gardner identifies.

Based on the products and assessment arising out of these projects, I have come to believe that a creative project teaches to the whole person in ways a standard academic prose essay or test cannot and that the learning is organic and holistic. It is also clear to me that holistic teaching fosters creativity and that creativity is easily accessible within mainstream approaches. When teachers assign anything that requires creativity, they are naturally leaning toward holism even if they are uninformed about holistic education or choose not to classify the assignment as holistic.

The creative project is holistic in a way the standard research paper is not because the project puts the whole person into relationship with the emotional, the physical, the intellectual, the social, the aesthetic, and the spiritual. Through these ways, according to John P. Miller, "if we can work with the Self, we can facilitate development for ourselves and our students" (*Holistic Teacher* 36). Combined, these ways bring about inclusion, balance, and connection. They bridge polarities and dichotomies commonly found in mainstream education today.

To complete a creative project with expertise, students naturally combine analytic thinking, critical thinking, research, creativity, and reflection. They must imagine their project completed and then attempt to reach the image they have mentally created. As they reach toward completion, they participate physically and socially when choosing collaboration with peers and then again during the presentations of their completed projects. Their spirits and souls are engaged with work they choose, create, and design, and their intellectual abilities are stretched with the challenge of synthesizing course material into a creative artifact that they judge to be aesthetically pleasing. A transcendent unity occurs when, through the creative impulse, these parts of the learner are integrated and harmonized within their expressive project. Through these projects students develop a holistic worldview, one that provides "an ability to see connections between diverse things and see the bigger picture" (Zohar and Marshall, qtd. in Lantieri 17). Students also have an opportunity to develop spiritual intelligence which Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall define as

intelligence with which we address and solve problems of meaning and value, the intelligence with which we can place our actions and our lives in a wider, richer meaning-giving context. It is the intelligence with which we can assess that one course of action or one life path is more meaningful than another. (qtd. in Lantieri 18)

According to the research completed on imagery and creativity by Sylvia Ainsworth-Land as discussed in John P. Miller's *The Holistic Curriculum*, the relationship between creativity and imagery can be understood as developmental. The first order is sense related and arises out of physical need. The second involves improvement of an idea or artistic product through analysis and evaluation. The third order requires synthesis, not just revision or modification. Something new or novel must be discovered through the synthesis before there is a breakthrough to new knowledge or understanding. The final level, Ainsworth-Land states, occurs when "one's whole being comes into play with the conscious and unconscious minds, reason and intuition, inner and outer, subsumed into a kind of meta-consciousness. . . . The self is seen as part of a larger reality. [Here,

one is] building new perceptual order” (qtd. in *Holistic Curriculum* 94). I have seen students building new perceptual order as a result of the creative projects they complete in my courses.

While I use holistic assignments within most of my courses, this paper features two courses: English 460, Current Issues in English, a senior capstone required of our English majors and English 345, Studies in Authors, a requirement for our major. Students in both classes are mostly seniors about to graduate.³

English 460: Current Issues in English

My section of English 460 introduces the field of holistic education and explores the role English has within it. We read approximately seven textbooks that present histories, philosophies, and profiles of existing holistic schools. Students research up to ten holistic schools selecting one for extended use in their creative project. This establishes the domain for their creative projects. They then create an interactive holistic English assignment to fit that particular school. During the final three weeks of the semester, students facilitate the assignment with their class members who assume the role of the students attending that school. These interactive presentations are generally designed to use 45 to 60 minutes of class time as determined by class size, and they tend to be highly social and communal events. Students have demonstrated visualization, drawing, dance, song, music, poetry, writing, drama, fiction, cooking, sewing, group collaboration, reflection, logical reasoning, emotion, silence, smell, taste, and felt sense.

A few brief summaries of student presentations can give an idea of what these assignments aim for. Consider Derold Sligh’s project titled, “Finding Meanings in Native American Poetry and Nurturing the Inner Self.” It was developed for fifth graders attending a Waldorf School in Idaho. It required a prerequisite of an introduction to poetry analysis and aimed to connect Native American culture to the personal culture of the student. Students were asked to write a poem using an Indian symbol such as an element (rock, water, fire) or an animal, then to create an illustration representing the ideas of the poem, and finally to present (on a volunteer basis) the poem through chanting, movement, dance, or dramatic gestures. Derold provided three incomplete prompts for students to finish as similes that would become stanzas in the poem. For example, “my body is like (choose a symbol) because. . .; my soul is like (choose a symbol) because. . . and my spirit is like (choose a symbol) because . . .” Derold also provided samples of Native American poems as models. Derold’s project demonstrated ways research and creativity can be combined so that research supports creativity.

Clint Burhan’s project, “Write Your Own Ending,” featured a small segment of a multi-disciplinary, semester-long course for high-school aged students attending Windsor House Alternative School, located in Vancouver, British Columbia. Students would choose a play or write their own to produce and perform at the end of the semester. In the class presentation, Clint divided the students into groups of four. Two students assumed the role of characters, one the director, and one the playwright. He then provided plot details, but not the ending. The stu-

³A special thanks goes to the students of English 345 and 460, but particularly to those cited in this article: Clint Burhans, Amy Conger, Carrie Jones, Caroline Lake, Jared Nagel, Derold Sligh, and Martin Trent. These seven students gave permission for me to use their work and their real names.

dents discussed the plot, wrote their own ending, and performed it for the class. To develop this assignment, Clint searched for a play that would serve his purposes. He spent a significant amount of library time in his search and finally selected “K2” by Patrick Meyers. The plot in this play forces one character to decide whether he is to die on a mountain top with his friend who suffers a broken leg during their climb or to leave his friend to die alone. If he stays, he too will die from extreme cold and exposure. If he leaves, he probably will survive. Through this assignment students understood a moral dilemma presented through drama, examined their own values, and expressed their own solution to the problem posed in the dramatic text. Clint was willing to spend the library hours because he valued the connection his research and creativity shared.

Amy Conger and Jared Nagel wanted to teach literary elements to eighth graders in a Waldorf School. Following the Waldorf schedule, they planned on using the two-hour morning block of time over a five-day period. Their project, “Literary Elements from Dreams” asked students to work from a sample “dream” of their own, complete a worksheet on literary elements, draw representations of each element contained in their dream and then discuss with one another the elements and the drawings created. Terms such as personification, conflict, symbolism, characters, and setting were exemplified, and the assignment met six main principles of holistic education (spiritual, intellectual, aesthetic, emotional, social, and physical). Creativity, individual expression, and sharing with others were encouraged, and the literary elements were not taught solely as an intellectual or linguistic item. The assignment also invited students to utilize their most effective way of learning whether it is visual, spatial, or linguistic. Their project, like the previous two, blended research and creativity.

In written self evaluations of their project, students indicated a higher level of enjoyment, a more meaningful way of finishing a course, an appreciation for the opportunity to be creative, and a new confidence in their abilities to create effective holistic activities for future students.

When asked how the class changed their opinions about education, almost all said that they had not been aware of holistic education or specific holistic principles that can guide methodology, but now they knew education went beyond textbooks and tests. They began to see students as “individuals who need to be part of a community,” and they stated that “holistic education should be implemented into the public school system.”

English 345: Studies in Authors

English 345: Studies in Authors is presented in a more standard format than English 460. The department syllabus allows teachers to select one or two authors to feature in depth. When I teach the course, I design a series of holistic activities for students to experience. I assign a creative project to be presented at the end of the course. This does not have to be an interactive project but has to synthesize the ideas and learning experiences from the course material. It aims to provide a balance between linguistic/logical ways of knowing and non linguistic/logical ways of knowing. Such a balance helps students “to find their special talents and also to develop a healthy respect for talents they do not themselves possess” (Noddings 43). The students’ projects need to “represent” the author’s scope in a creative way that draws from a wide range of examples from the written works. Library research is not required, but students often use it to expand

their work. A written description of the project accompanies the project. It lists the ideas the project is presenting, including quotes, titles, and page numbers from the various texts that are synthesized in the creative representation. It describes the creative process the student used to complete the project. It evaluates the project and asks the student to reflect on their learning experience during the creative process. Finally, students briefly contrast and/or compare the creative projects to traditional assignments such as research papers or essay tests. During spring 2004 we read the works of Willa Cather. Motivated by Satish Kumar's call for holistic education to organize around the trinity of soil, soul, and society, we used this trinity as a theme for discussing Cather's works.

During Spring 2004, student projects included: poster board collages, quilts, poetry, creative nonfiction essays, clothing design, oil paintings, art analysis, maps, ethnic food preparation, scrapbooks, analysis of cultural wedding practices, minicomics, analysis of folktales and their origins, abstract sculptures, and a survey of land use including field size and crop rotations as inferred by textual references. These self-selected projects demonstrated ways students, motivated by various textual content, use their existing talents to create expressions of their understanding of course material.

Carrie Jones decided to make a quilted wall hanging depicting various textual scenes. She included 16 panels that synthesized 10 novels and multiple short stories. She chose scenes that "stuck out in my mind/imagination and/or because of their underlying meaning/symbolism, but also those that matched my level of skill" (this being only the third quilt she had sewn).

Taking more than 30 hours to complete, Carrie was very proud of her work and thanked me for an assignment that was fun but also rewarding. As she compared this assignment to a more traditional assignment, she said:

I really enjoyed this project! It offered something different! It forced us to use our imagination and to be creative! Also, given that I am a graduated senior working on a second degree and have written papers upon papers upon papers, that task has gotten very monotonous and I have come to resent it GREATLY! Another "also" . . . Elaborating on that theme (i.e., writing paper after paper), we are expected to write those in an academic voice and I, emotionally, CAN'T take that level of stuffiness anymore. Believe me! My Shakespeare teacher believes me ignorant because of my tone; that which is not ignorance, but sarcasm and punctuational idiosyncrasies to show the personal thought(s) and emotion(s) going into my response(s)—to show that I am really, sincerely, interested. Just, thank you so much for giving us something F-U-N to work on!

Carrie then continues to define F-U-N.

If questioned, consider this: fun = a willingness to participate; fun = the possibility for a greater interest/energy/involvement; therefore, fun (willingness+interest/energy/involvement) = greater retention of information and connections/syntheses (i.e. as opposed to research papers, and/or essay tests, which immediately following such you seek to dump the information as soon as it's no longer required).

When a student is deeply connected to course work, they experience a holistic learning that lasts beyond the last day of class. This was definitely Carrie's experience, as it was for other students in the class.

Martin Trent, an urban, African American student, struggled all semester with enjoying Cather's work; he could not identify with many of the characters or with rural settings that dominate her literature. However, the creative project let him eventually find a way into her work. He wrote twelve poems from which he selected five ("Manuelito," "Love," "Wicked," "Frank," and "To My Brothers") and one rap verse ("Under the Tree") to present. Despite severe nervousness over reading his work, he responded well (and with great satisfaction) to an encore performance of special requests from his classmates.

In his creative writing, Martin concentrated on characters from three of Cather's novels voicing "alternative perspectives" from characters. For example, in *O' Pioneers*, Frank is presented by Cather to be a jealous, harsh husband. Readers do not find him to be a sympathetic character, especially after he shoots his wife, Marie, and her lover, Emil. Yet Martin felt sympathetic toward Frank and wanted his classmates to reconsider Frank's position. Basing his responses on textual elements found in the novel, Martin represented Frank in a kinder light. From his poem our view of Frank was then reconstructed and expanded. Another poem, "To My Brothers," allowed *O' Pioneers* protagonist Alexandra to express her feelings toward her brothers in a more dramatic manner than what Cather chose. And delving deeper into the characters of *O' Pioneers*, Martin wrote a rap, "Under the Tree," for Emil to use on Marie because rap is a traditional African American linguistic form men use with women when they want phone numbers or attention.

When reflecting on this assignment, Martin said,

the most challenging aspect of this assignment was trying to create something based on someone else's creation. Also the presentation will be a challenge. As an artist, you are always super worried about how well the audience will receive what you have to offer—sometimes even more than the grade. The most rewarding aspect was finding out that I'm capable of capturing an essence of a character already in existence, and being able to see things from their point of view. The easiest part was writing the rap verse that was based on Emil and Marie. When you rap, you're usually slipping into some other character anyway. At the very least, you have to become an exaggerated form of yourself. As compared to a research paper, the creative project definitely was more fun. It was so fun because it allowed me to incorporate two of my favorite art forms into a classroom assignment. It was fun to push myself at times. It gave me the opportunity to make Cather enjoyable to me on some levels. I would trade in the anxiety that the presentation brings out in me. If you fail a research paper, at least only a couple people will know about it.

The benefits of this assignment were not only academic. Martin demonstrated involvement on the social, intellectual, spiritual, aesthetic, physical, and emotional levels. When writing a standard research paper or essay test, his experience would have been limited to an intellectual experience only. The holistic

assignment provided a pathway of self discovery and aesthetic expression that bound him to the culture of English 345 in a more holistic and meaningful way, in a way that let him learn and succeed.

A final example illustrates how students might rely on visual intelligence to modify a linguistic text into a visual text that speaks to them. It also demonstrates how students can rely on what they know and love while expanding on what they are learning in a class.

Caroline Lake compiled a twenty-page scrapbook. Each page displayed one to three pictures that were accompanied by a quote from Cather's work. At first, Caroline had wanted to build a Cather website, but she decided that would be too time consuming and beyond the range of this assignment's guidelines. Then she wanted to create a collage, but a single collage didn't seem to appeal to her, so finally she selected a scrapbook so that she could create multiple collages. She got this idea while working on her wedding scrapbook. Since she "loves" scrapbooking, she decided to incorporate Cather's work into something she loves. When describing the process she used to complete this work, she said:

My first step was to re-read or scan-read all the assigned Cather novels and short stories and highlight passages which I found to be emotionally impacting, interesting, or characterized the theme of soil, soul and society. . . . the next step was to search for pictures and images that integrated the "feeling" of the quote into colors and images. . . . I printed all the pictures onto photo-paper and then cut and cropped them to my liking. . . . When I scrapbook, I do "marathons"—I'll sit for 6-8 hours and work until my eyes hurt. I cannot help it. I get so into "the zone" that the passage of time is irrelevant to me. I did four marathon sessions of scrapbooking and spent an odd hour here and there working on bits and pieces. All in all, from the beginning of actual work to the end, I spent about 38 hours on this project—this doesn't include the acquisition of the quotes; add another 6 hours reading. The time was well spent and enjoyable . . . was well used because I was doing something I enjoyed. It was fun to search for images to match my feelings and even more fun to make those pictures and quotes mine.

When comparing this to traditional assignments, Caroline said:

The idea of a "creative project" in lieu of formal testing is wonderful. Instead of concentrating on what is going to be on the test, the student is forming personal connections to the text because their creative project is centered on them and what activities they like to do in connection to the author's work. When a student is intent on forming personal connections to the text, they retain the information longer because it is tied to something personal. I believe that if anyone didn't like the creative project idea, they were not true to themselves—the whole idea was to pick a project that was near and dear to you. What makes this idea hard though, is that every project is different; I like the idea of an accompanying "write-up" in order to see what steps the student took in order to reach their end-point and what their thought process was. All in all, I could have done a Willa Cather test, but I enjoyed this so much better.

Although the students did not read Sylvia Ashton-Warner's *Teacher*, when Caroline writes that "when a student is intent on forming personal connections to the text, they retain the information longer because it is tied to something personal," she echoes Ashton-Warner's philosophy for "organic learning"—a philosophy that is well known and accepted by holistic educators. As Ashton-Warner says, learning becomes organic when it is self-selected; "the more it means to [a student] the more value it is to him [sic]" (54). Caroline's opinion that if students did not like the creative project assignment they were not being "true to themselves" again underscores the core of organic learning. Holistic learning is organic precisely because it provides learners with a path for permanent learning—permanent because it is intrinsically connected to self.

The experiences of the six students profiled in this essay are common when research and creativity are united. Even students who resist reading and writing are able to complete a creative project when they are allowed to use their own talents and interests. Moreover, students can draw from whichever intelligence suits them as they go about the process of creating their project. They seek out research when it becomes necessary to meet the goals of the project that they have selected, and in such a situation they begin to perceive research as part of their "choice" rather than as an academic "requirement." Creativity refreshes their soul and then ignites cognition; objective data simply functions to support and supplement the creative impulse. Suddenly, creativity and research are complementary to the goal, interconnected, and no longer dichotomous.

A fusion of creativity and research does not neglect the intellect; it simply creates opportunities for a more holistic, organic learning experience—one that lets students have fun as they gain permanent knowledge. This fusion offers a holistic way of learning that values multiple intelligences, includes a broader field of rhetorical and social choices, and connects learners to them. Students learn to value creativity as highly as, or even more highly than, logical and linguistic ways of knowing. As a result they inculcate a reliance and dependence on their ability to be creative, and the creative process becomes a routine natural way of learning. ☐

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