#4OCF Post: The Four Es of Creativity

By Trevor Bryan

The following post is a much longer post than we usually share on #4ocf. However, if you teach a creative domain, your district is discussing creativity and how to foster it in your students, or you have a creative practice of your own, it may be of interest. It's a concept that Trevor has been working on for about a year. He's excited to share it and would love to hear any thoughts you have about it.

The Four Es of Creativity

By Trevor Andrew Bryan
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If schools are going to effectively teach creativity then educators need ways to think about and understand what creativity looks like and how it works. They need ways to make the concept of creativity more concrete and less abstract.What does creative work actually look like? How does creativity work? How can they identify students who are being creative? And how can educators establish an environment where creativity can flourish? The Four Es of Creativity (Environment, Execution, Emotion and Exploration) establishes a simple framework to think about, discuss and answer these questions.

The Four Es are based on analyzing various works of successful creative people and provides a rationale as to why and how their work might be deemed creatively successful. The four Es can therefore also help educators who teach creative domains to compare professional creators and their works to their students' creative experiences. Regardless of the creative domain, recognizing the Four Es of Creativity in your students, their creations, your classroom and your curriculum is a good start to ensuring that you are helping your students develop the practices and thinking necessary for developing an effective creative voice.

The First E: Environment

Recognizing the environment our students are operating in is the first step to ensuring our students are truly developing their creative voice. By environment, I don't mean the physical space that students are working in but the parameters that they are working with. Environments,

as Robin M. Hogarth theorizes, can be thought of along a spectrum. On one side of the spectrum are Kind Environments. On the opposite side of the spectrum are Wicked Environments.

Kind Environments are environments in which there are consistent parameters and well-defined notions of correct and incorrect. Because of the clear sense of correct and incorrect, providing feedback is easy to give and next steps are easy to figure out. Kind environments are associated with memorization, algorithms, simple patterns and muscle memory. Measuring performance in kind environments is straightforward because of the clear sense of correctness or incorrectness regarding the finished outcome. With enough practice and feedback, most students can master operating in Kind Environments.

Wicked Environments are environments in which parameters are not consistent, there is not a clear sense of correct or incorrect, providing feedback is not straightforward, and next steps can be difficult to figure out. Previous memorized material, algorithms, patterns and muscle memory may or may not be useful. Measuring performance in Wicked Environments is difficult because there is no clear sense of correctness. There is no such thing as mastering a Wicked Environment because Wicked Environments are, by definition, unfamiliar, unknown, and constantly changing.

Although learning to operate in a Kind Environment can be helpful and is not necessarily harmful, it is not a good indication of future creative success. Outcomes in Kind Environments are, for the most part predictable, and are therefore not based on new ideas, approaches, or concepts. Coming up with new ideas, approaches or concepts is often at the heart of creative work.

Learning to operate in a Wicked Environment is basically what every person who has made a significant creative contribution to humanity has done. Anyone who has created something new, something different, something never before seen or heard or experienced was operating in a Wicked Environment. No one could tell them exactly what to do to be successful. They had to work through mistakes, deadends, and faulty ideas. They had to navigate naysayers, and misguided or wrong opinions. They had to feel lost, confused and often alone. But learning to operate in a Wicked Environment is paramount to developing a creative voice. If students are going to develop their creative voices then having opportunities to experience what it feels like to enter into and operate within Wicked Environments should be a frequent part of their creative education.

The Second E: Execution

In the Four Es of Creative Work, execution is associated with skills and techniques. In many ways, for many creators, developing and honing skills and certain techniques is an important part of their creative road trip. Many creators have spent countless hours mastering certain skills and techniques that are vital to their work. However, it's important to recognize that not every creator needs every skill or technique associated with their domain of choice. Plenty of

artists and creators found success by abandoning traditional skills, techniques and rules of their chosen domain or by not knowing the skills, techniques or rules of their specific domain at all.

Skills and techniques can be helpful to have but sometimes focusing on developing and honing skills and techniques can become an impediment to developing a unique and personal voice. If Hemmingway spent his time mastering the prominent style of his predecessors, he never would have created his signature style for writing novels.. If Faith Ringold, Alice Kneel, or Jacob Lawrence spent all of their time getting their art to look "right" by traditional standards, they never would have created their signature styles. If Gustavo Santaolalla spent his time learning to read and write music or spent his time learning to play the oud "correctly," he may never have created his Oscar winning soundtrack for *Brokeback Mountain.*

Because skills are easy to measure, in a data driven educational world where showing growth is often king, it's easy to focus tons of energy on developing traditionally recognized skills and techniques of creative domains. Having students demonstrate their proficiency with skills is safe. Additionally, it's easy to believe that teaching certain skills, some of which have been recognized in the specific domain for literally centuries, is important for our students. However, in today's world, with so many tools and avenues available for creation, and with so many models of what successful creative work can look like, students may be better served if they develop the skills they need to create the work they are interested in making. It's certainly not bad to expose students to various skills and techniques but the insistence that all students need to master certain skills or technique in order to be successful is not valid. As much as possible, let interest and curiosity drive the skills and techniques introduced.

Traditional skills and techniques often exist in Kind Environments. As discussed above, most great creators don't become great because of their ability to operate in a Kind Environment. Having students operate mostly in Kind Environments can create a false perception of how creative success is achieved. Having students spending most of their time working on traditional skills and techniques and judging their mastery of these skills and techniques can send the message that their future success is based on their mastery of these specific skills. This is potentially a dangerous message to send and we as arts educators must work hard to make sure that students and other novice creators don't stop creating because of a limited or false belief as to what creativity is, how it happens, what it's supposed to look like.

The Spectrum of Skills and Techniques

Skills and Techniques fall under two categories: General or Given and Found or Sought. General or Given Skills and techniques are those that are shown to the students because the teacher (or some other authority) decides that the student should be aware of them. On the other end of the spectrum are skills and techniques that a creator discovers or seeks out on their own.

Given or General skills may or may not be relevant to the creative work that a creator wants to make. It's not inherently bad to expose students to various skills and techniques because

knowing what skills and techniques will be of interest and of use to a student isn't always clear. However, the process of sharing these types of skills and techniques has to be seen as somewhat random in that every creator doesn't need and won't use every skill and technique in their work. Trouble can arise with this type of instruction when a student is made to feel as though being a successful creator requires them to be proficient with every skill or technique that is randomly selected for them to engage with especially if the way they are instructed to use these skills and techniques is highly scripted and predictable.

Found or Discovered Skills and Techniques and Sought Skills and Techniques are skills that the creator (through their own explorations) decides to explore or practice on their own because they are either interested in them or the creator feels s(he) needs them to create the kind of work they want to make. For many successful creators, their success relied on them figuring out what traditional skills and techniques they needed or didn't need, how to apply previously known skills and techniques (some from outside their domain) in new and interesting ways, and/or completely inventing new skills and techniques to create their work. This is true in any creative domain. Students will be better served if they learn to seek, discover, and invent the skills and techniques they need to craft the work they want to make rather than believe that someone else knows exactly what skills and techniques they need for their creative success.

The Third E: Emotion

As humans, emotions drive our experience with the world. Underlying everything we do, is an emotional relationship. Behind our favorite foods, our least favorite foods, our favorite season, our least favorite season, our jobs, where we live, our childhood, the lighting we have, the color of our couch, is an emotion that falls somewhere in the neighborhood of joy and happiness, indifference, or anger and sadness. Obviously this isn't an exhaustive list of the emotions we can feel but I think you get the idea: we humans attach positive, negative or neutral emotions to everything.

Emotion also drives our reaction to art. This is why the notion that the mastery of certain skills and techniques is crucial to arts education students is overstated (and often over emphasized). Art we love isn't always based on the most skilled creator or the creator with the best technique, it's often based on the creator whose work connects with us the most emotionally. Yes, we can love an artwork because it's skillfully done and technically perfect but we've also all experienced artworks that although skillfully done and technically perfect make us yawn. We've also experienced artworks that lack traditional skills and are technically imperfect that we absolutely love.

A large part of creating work that will matter to an audience is creating work that connects with them emotionally. Certain, traditional skills and techniques may help creators produce this kind of work but certain, traditional skills and techniques are just as likely to be

absent from this work. Creators need to be aware of the importance of making an emotional connection. Being able to create work that connects emotionally with an audience is more important for creators than developing arbitrary skills and techniques.

In creative education, students have to have experiences trying to create artwork that connects to an audience emotionally. Without an emotional connection, regardless of how skillful or technically sound their work is, its success will, most likely, be limited at best. Connecting emotionally in a unique and interesting way, does not exist solely in a Kind Environment, it often requires venturing into a Wicked Environment. The way the creators of the past connected to their audience is probably not going to work as effectively for most creators today. Meaningful connection is going to require something new, something fresh, something unknown. Although at times connecting emotionally can exist in a Kind Environment it can easily move into a Wicked Environment because it's not usually clear how something new and different will connect.

Unless students have explicit practice trying to connect emotionally they are not likely to learn how to connect their ideas, stories, and passions with an audience. Trying to create work that connects emotionally should be a major part of any writing, art, film, music, technology or any other class associated with creating and communication.

The Spectrum of Emotion

Creative works can be divided into two categories of emotion. Works that mostly connect emotionally only to the creator or a small group of people and those that connect more broadly to a larger population or large group. This distinction between small group connection and large group connection might seem flawed because, as mentioned, it's hard to tell how newly created things are going to be received but from a creative standpoint understanding this distinction can be freeing.

When creators have a realistic awareness of who their creations are for and the likelihood of the reactions to their work by various groups, it can free them from the burden of trying to please everyone. All art isn't for all. Some students are very good at creating work that appeals to their teachers and parents (or some other perceived "gatekeeper") some are good at creating work that appeals to their peers, and some creators can do both. And some creators are really good at creating artwork that, at least in the beginning, only mainly appeals to themselves.

Creating work that has limited appeal can be isolating and therefore extremely hard to sustain. Understanding that many creators, and many successful creators, succeeded even though their work was dismissed, ignored or ridiculed by many can help students who create this kind of work to feel more confident exploring the offbeat path that they may be on. Arts educators need to be more aware that students who create work that does not appeal to their teachers and parents can often be explicitly or implicitly encouraged to make more conforming work which, even if

well intentioned, might be to the detriment of them developing their own, unique creative voices.

Identifying what kind of creator a student is, can make it easier to find creators for them to study, in order to draw inspiration from and to learn lessons about working from. This can be especially helpful to students whose work is difficult for most people to relate to. Regardless of the kind of creations students are making, finding kindred spirits, even if only across the internet or centuries, can be powerful and potentially life-changing connections for them to make.

The Fourth E: Exploration

Exploration can be broken into three levels. Level one exploration is exploring something that is largely known but new to the explorer. For instance a musician who has never played a Beatles song before. Beatles songs are largely known but for this type of musician, learning to play a Beatles' song would be a completely new experience for them. Level two exploration is a combination of exploring something that is largely known and something completely new. For example, a musician who is trying to craft an original song in the style of the Beatles. Level Three Exploration is when someone is exploring something that is completely unknown. For instance, a musician trying to craft a completely new sound. The Beatles did a lot of this work.

The willingness to explore, to dive into the unknown, to roam the edges, to try it out and see what happens, this is what every great creator has. Nearly every single person who has made a significant creative contribution to humanity has been an explorer who jumped into Level Three Exploration. They entered into Wicked Environments, operated in Wicked Environments and figured out what skills they needed to navigate that Wicked Environment. Without exploration, nothing new or unexpected would ever be discovered or created.

Level three (L3) exploration exists in a Wicked Environment because there is no way of knowing where it is going to lead, if it will be successful or fail, or what other ideas and possibilities it will lead to. One of the difficulties with L3 exploratory work is it can be nearly impossible to know if it is good or not, especially for outsiders removed from the process. This is why it can be so hard for new things to gain traction. At one time van Gogh's paintings were worthless, J. K Rowling, couldn't sell *Harry Potter*, rap music wasn't considered music, and the Wright brothers had trouble selling their airplane to the military. Looking back on these events they all seem insane but when these creations were new, because they came out of highly explorative practices and were so different then what was known and familiar, it was difficult for "experts" and many others, to judge if they were "good" or not.

One strategy that might be helpful in determining if a deeper exploration of a path is warranted is deciding if the work being made is interesting or not to the maker: How much enthusiasm (perhaps a fifth E?) exists regarding the exploration? In the beginning of an exploration, judging whether something is good or bad is irrelevant. As professional creators

know, making good work often takes tremendous amounts of time and revision. The thing that will sustain the creator to get to the good work (if it's ever going to be good) is their interest or enthusiasm in doing the work that they are making.

If we are going to generate a creative generation, then students have to be willing to enter into the unknown. Thay have to know what it feels like to explore without a clear destination, without the safety of rubrics and without concise, accurate feedback. This is what creativity demands.

What Does This Mean for Arts Education?

Because I predominantly teach, what would most likely be called "Fine Arts," the following passage is written from the perspective of fine arts education. However, every creative domain has a range from traditional or classic practices to experimental practices. So if you are a non-art educator, identify the range of practices in your own specific domain and read and think about it through that lens.

Redefining "The Best" Artists

If I ask a class of students, I bet in any grade, who the best artist in the class is, I'm pretty sure that at least ninety percent of the time, the student named would be the student who draws something most accurately. In other words, the person deemed "best artist" would have good execution or good skills and techniques in regards to rendering something familiar. In scenarios like this, too often, emotional connection and exploration are not considered. The kid who draws wonky hearts, squiggly rainbows, and hugging stick figures, celebrating and effectively communicating the love they have for others would be dismissed. And the kid who creates piles of indiscernible things fashioned out of found objects and tape would also be dismissed. And yet, what we know, by reflecting on successful creative work, some work is celebrated for its' execution, some work is celebrated for its' emotional connection, and some is celebrated for its' explorative nature. The most popular creative works are probably a combination of all three Es: they are reasonably well executed, they resonate emotionally and they are, at least somewhat, exploratory, offering something new and different.

Students who have great skills and techniques, who can make things look right or real, often would benefit from developing their ability to make more emotionally charged artwork and to explore possibility. Just because they can draw Donald Duck or a pear accurately doesn't automatically mean they have a successful creative life ahead of them. Drawing Donald Duck and creating Donald Duck are two very different enterprises. Drawing Donald Duck requires the ability to operate well in a Kind Environment. It requires the maker to have the ability to copy a known entity with precision. Creating Donald Duck requires the ability to operate in a Wicked

Environment. This requires the maker to have the ability to operate in the unknown, deal with various feedback and opinions, and charge ahead often amongst confusion and doubt.

We need to move in the direction of considering all of the Es when we think about what makes a great artist, what makes a great creator. If our perception and the general population's perception of a great creator doesn't move pass Execution (skills and techniques) we not only exclude and isolate many potentially creative individuals, we may be inadvertently stifling skilled creators potential. Recognizing what E drives a student's creative practice, and validating that E within them, can go a long way in supporting their creative development and voice.

Teaching Creativity with the Four Es in Mind

Creativity Education should be designed with the Four Es of Creativity in mind. Students should be gaining experience operating in different environments, developing and finding different kinds of skills, attempting to connect emotionally and frequently exploring. To help do so, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Are students spending most of their time in a Kind Environment or a Wicked Environment?

Since creative individuals spend most of their time in Wicked Environments, students should be too.

2. What percentage of class time are students spending on Execution (Skills and Techniques)?
3. Are students mostly exploring skills and techniques that are given to them?
4. Are students exploring skills and techniques that they are finding and seeking?

Skills and techniques should be shared with students but be wary about spending too much time with the sole goal of mastery especially when the product or outcome is highly predictable.

5. Is student work focusing on various ways to effectively connect emotionally with a specific audience?
6. Are they creating work with the intent of connecting to a large audience?
7. Are they making work that is intended to connect with a small audience?
8. Are they making work that is highly personal and may be hard for others to understand?

Not everyone's audience will be the same which means that everyone isn't going to like what people create. Too often, students are making artwork to please their teacher, their parents or some other authority figure. Often, pleasing a teacher or parent can mean using a skill or

technique well without a meaningful emotional connection. This doesn't necessarily serve students well. Make sure that students are making art that attempts to connect emotionally and meaningfully with specific audiences in mind.

9. Are students exploring?
10. What levels are they exploring?

Since every creator has ventured into the unknown, this is the practice that students should be cognizant of and engaged with. It's that simple. Curiosity and exploration are at the heart of meaningful creative endeavors. Turning an unknown into a known is what creative work is all about. Students have to be exploring.

11. How are you making room for all types of creators?

Some creators are going to focus on skills and techniques. Some creators will be driven more by making emotional connections (with themselves or others). And some creators will be highly exploratory. There is not a singular path for creating successful work. Students need to be aware of the different types of creators and their work and be fully encouraged to use their strengths.