

Embodying Creativity

As I walk into the classroom, the first thing I notice is the absence of solid walls. I seem to have entered an outdoor domed enclosure; comfortable, shaded sheltered, full of natural light filtered by moving green leaves. The air smells fresh and is moving gently and quietly, hardly enough to stir the plants arranged around the perimeter of the room. I can also hear water trickling. Students of mixed ages and genders are seated on small cushions on the polished warm floor, fanning out in semicircles around a makeshift stage area containing a set made of roughly improvised draped cloth and a few dramatically placed found objects. Mozart's Requiem fills the air as if the orchestra and choir are present in the room, and all attention is riveted on the two players, centre stage, who are miming with great drama, a scene they have improvised representing a moment in History from the Second World War. Three more players wind their way through the audience to join the action on stage and the play reaches its climax and ends, leaving the audience in the grip of the horror portrayed on stage. The adult mentor stands and instructs the audience to rise and with movement, represent how they feel about what they have just seen. There is silence broken only by the sounds of bare feet slapping the floor as the audience writhes representing the horror and agony they understand to be an experience of war. "And now," booms the voice of the mentor, "with sound!" Immediately the air is filled with the audience's sounds of screaming, sirens wailing, machine gun fire, shouting, sobbing and weeping.

A gong sounds, silence falls over the room and the audience and players are guided to sit in stillness, and then as they feel ready, to move to the perimeter of the room and collect paper and pastels, to return to their cushions and represent their experience in colour and shape. The mentor instructs the students to give their representations a title and then the drawings are collected by the players, taken to a veranda area, blue tacked onto screens and sprayed with fixative. While this is happening, the mentor is leading the class through a series of stretches and visualisations, designed not only to relieve any tension in the body, but also to maintain the connection between the mind and the body. Breath and movement restores connection with the earth, balances both sides of the brain and relaxes the students into an alert engagement with the next improvised short performance.

These short hastily improvised plays and sets have been put together by the small groups of players working together collaboratively after sharing discoveries made through their private research via internet, library and text books. Their grouping has come about through self selecting around topics raised by the whole group after listening to a story read by the mentor in an earlier class. After reviewing the response of the audience, each student writes notes in key word format and quick visual representing, and returns to become audience for the next play. There are twenty-five students in this group, and each play lasts for 5

minutes with 10 minutes of response and preparation time between plays. After an hour and fifteen minutes, the mentor hands round the notes prepared by each group and then gives the instructions for homework. "Selecting any of the five topics you have witnessed or participated in today, write about what you now know about fascism and war that is new to you, using further research to investigate your area of interest. " You can choose your mode of writing from the following: newspaper report, main story TV news item, screenplay, documentary, essay or poem. Hand your research notes in with your final work. Remember to document your sources. Remember to ask for help from the IT and library staff, they are there to assist your research. At our next meeting, we will discuss issues arising out of your research and your experiences today."

"Thank you for your splendid participation in today's class, I felt moved by the sincerity of your work today. If you feel inspired to work any of these cameos up for our end of term performance on the main stage, better book a place now with Maxine in Theatreworks as she tells me space is filling up fast. Remember to collect your visual representations and add them to your portfolios to be used for inspiration when you are writing, and to be kept for our final day of clustering for this subject.

As the students leave the classroom, and pull on their shoes, I notice that some of them look pensive and thoughtful, others, relieved to be moving out of the heaviness of war and others hurrying to let off steam outdoors. There are a few Monty Python clowns, goose stepping in unison with one arm raised and the other held under their noses representing Hitler's moustache.

What I noticed most about my experience of the class, was that every student was fully engaged.

This reminds me of when I was at Primary School, in the palm of my teacher's hand, along with the rest of the class, being read a story. The teacher's voice rose and fell and her lips curled in disdain, her eyebrows arched with surprise, and always her eyes moving from the text to her audience, holding us in her spell. We were engaged in relationship with her, hanging on every word, present to every nuance. It was a warm Spring afternoon and I can still remember her name, Miss Brooker, the smell of the breeze, the blackbird's song in the background, and a bluebottle buzzing lazily.

There is no reason for the magic of education to be left behind with childhood. We only have to return to our senses, and I mean that quite literally, to recapture the rapture we felt as children.

I teach Creative Process to a small group of adult artists, and a large group of adults who sing together, but probably do not consider themselves to be singers. At the beginning of every class, we take the time to get ourselves warmed up and embodied. This takes 30 minutes in the singing class for a two hour session, and

is partly necessary to prevent damage to the vocal chords because we sing in a full bodied, boisterous way.

If we are not using much sound in the creative process class, embodying and imaginative warm ups are typically shorter. I may teach a Samoan clap dance for example, which makes my students laugh because, they say, it is entirely impossible to think whilst clapping the complicated patterns. With such busy minds that are usually multi-tracking, my students say that it is refreshing to have a rest from the frantic noise of their minds, and very pleasurable. As they sink deeper into their bodies, they find unexpected emotions arising, unacknowledged grief, tears, joy and laughter, and a well of knowledge and inspiration they didn't know they had. All very useful for artistic expression or singing I hear you say, but how might this be relevant for maths and literacy?

One of my students, Georgie Munro, is a volunteer at her children's secondary school, working with students experiencing difficulty with some aspect of their literacy. She was asked to work on the literacy skills of 13-15 year old boys, who had failed the existing teaching system for reading and stuttered their way painfully through simple texts. Georgie noticed, after some of weeks of observation, that the students had picked up most of the basic skills required for successful reading, yet made frequent mistakes. Guessing that the students might have a fear of reading aloud and might have felt humiliated by making mistakes in the past, Georgie experimented with some ideas to remove fear, adapted from exercises used in my Creative Process class.

Georgie began by having the boys invent their own superhero, then draw and speak as the heroes, describing themselves in the first person. "I drive a red super-sports car with ejecting seats!" Georgie participated in the experiment herself, as a clapped out lady-superhero that needed a holiday. Then after a series of exercises using; writing on sticky notes, visual representing with crayons, a ceremony with a rubbish bin, connecting with emotions and positive re-enforcement, Georgie had each student read a couple of pages, with remarkable results. The students had gone from making at least one mistake in approximately every two lines, to reading a whole page without a mistake. Stuttering and stumbling was replaced with confidence and fluidity. Georgie then had the students create a positive statement about reading, using key words generated by the exercises.

The sentences produced by the four students were:

- "I think I read better. I feel confident now I can do it. Now I reckon I will read for the rest of my life."
- "I am now more confident and a faster reader, I am finding it easier to read."

- “Reading is a big success for me. Its fun, enjoyment and I am calm about it.”
- “Getting better for sure. Today I paused only once. Its beginning to become fun, reading aloud. Handwriting and spelling getting the hang of.”

The impact lasted and was improved on during the next six months. Georgie has written instructions for the steps she followed in full for anyone who would like to try this experiment. (*See end of chapter.*)

Georgie has also experimented with the NLP idea of mapping learning modes using an eye movement map. After checking to confirm observations about which mode a poor speller was using to spell; audio create, audio recall, visual create, visual recall, etc., Georgie supported the student to learn to spell encyclopaedia using a sing song melody, rhythm and movement. The student had no difficulty in accurately recalling the spelling in the short term, and four weeks later could still spell encyclopaedia correctly.

Her next experiment will be to see if she can strengthen the child’s ability to visualise, using pictures first, then words, so that the best mode for spelling, visual recall can be employed by this reader.

Making use of the so called ‘right side of the brain’ for creative problem solving and innovation as well as art, has been well championed by writers like Vincent Nolan, Betty Edwards and Edward de Bono. ‘Emotional Intelligence’ has been championed by Daniel Goleman and writers like the depth psychologists: Thomas Moore, James Hillman and Robert Sardello, who also dare to speak of ‘heart’ and ‘soul’. For me the most exciting direction is that of the phenomenologists, such as David Abram, whose compelling work, ‘The Spell of the Sensuous’ champions the sensing body as the vehicle for receiving, storing and re-accessing knowledge. It is our bodies that receive all stimuli, and our brains, the body organs that process our bodies’ sensing. Our bodies store so much information, and through our bodies and movement, we can become aware of much that we have forgotten.

Subjects need not be disconnected from each other. Let’s see Art, Maths and Music taught in the same classroom, they are after all intimately connected. Surely biology, geology and anthropology would make geography lessons much more interesting, and why not combine them with history and archaeology. Why must our students chose between philosophy, music, literature and art? They are all interconnected, why not teach them that way.

I agree with John Ralston Saul who suggests we need a creative workforce to meet the rapid change we confront, and I suggest therefore that we need creativity to be modelled by embodied creative teachers. Let's have some "effervescent imaginative disorder" in our schools. Surely engaged fascinated students will reduce the need for the regimentation that schools of the past have employed to keep order. The English education system was based on a military model; a model designed to prevent people thinking for themselves. If we want a mature population that can think for itself, we must begin by giving our teachers creative and embodying tools and the time and space to apply them. There is no need to teach children how to think creatively, they could do that very well before they went to school. What's needed is the understanding provided by creative pioneers e.g. The Synectics Education Initiative, of how to remove the barriers to creativity and learning that education normally instils. Collaborative, structures that develop innovation, such as the Synectics Process and the MIECAT Process, can be applied to manage the integration of the cognitive, with imagination, movement, emotion and creative expression. All those students who are currently having their imaginative, collaborative, emotional and creative capabilities knocked out of them at school, would benefit from being taught the Synectics Process so that they can safely reclaim their creative and collaborative capacities.

I have noticed interest amongst scientists and teachers regarding how to measure creativity. My personal measure is to register the amount of smiling, laughter, engagement, concentration and the speed of learning. For example, if I play with some improvised, collaborative, rhythm work before teaching a new song, I notice that my singers learn the new song quickly and with less than usual effort on my part and theirs. Also, the harmonies are likely to be more exact and the whole group experiences a sense of satisfaction and pleasure, measured by smiles, laughter and a relaxed, focussed stillness.

This kind of creativity measuring also works in more serious groups. For example, in the last facilitator training I conducted, the laughter was so raucous and prolonged that people were drawn from all over the building to see what they were missing out on. The training was for the peer facilitators of Family Support Groups, for people who care for someone with an alcohol or other drug problem. These were people who were confronting every day, the pain, fear and despair of their children being heroin addicts. The laughter came about through an unplanned series of improvised role plays, which were used to test theories arising from the group about how to deal with difficult group members. On this occasion I had completely departed from my running sheet, and allowed the group to collaborate on some problem solving. No-one was upset by the unexpected change in direction from the programme, and I believe more was learnt because I was able to have the flexibility to follow the needs arising from the group, rather than imposing my own theory of what they needed to know. If teachers in schools could be allowed to have the same flexibility, I believe they would have a better rate of engagement with their students, more success with

creating the climate for learning, less time lost to discipline problems and less time lost to sickness and truancy.

According to John Cleese (1994), humour is also a useful creativity tool in itself:

“ordinary, common-or-garden laughter is the easiest way for us to get into open mode” (p.76)

It is easy to move from open, creative mode to closed logical mode when the need for focussed action demands it, and once there to get stuck in a groove. Humour and laughter move us back into creative and therefore open-minded mode, which is the place we need to be for learning. And best of all, laughter is a pleasurable embodying experience.

“I set no theory upon you
but try to resonate to the deeper truth
you hold in embodied feelings”

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· Realising that ‘embodied’ might not yet be everyday language, and is also one word describing a multiplicity of experiencing, some explanation follows: For an instant experience of being embodied, take off your shoes and socks and walk across the room having first dropped a box of drawing pins on the floor. The way you are as you tread carefully, all ears, eyes and present to the tips of your toes, is embodied. To stay that way for any length of time, without the prod of danger or discomfort, takes practice, if you are over five, own a pair of shoes and live in a Western country. Sportsman, musicians, actors, artists, dancers and criminals all need to be good at this in order to prosper in their chosen field.

And there are probably degrees of embodiment too. For example, the artist may be so focussed on the clay and her hands that she fails to smell the milk burning on the stove or hear the smoke alarm, or notice that she is hungry. The kind of embodiment called on for counselling the MIECAT way requires a sensitivity to one’s own body and feelings and a simultaneous alert attention to the client’s nuance and gesture, as well as the content of his story.

It is likely that a barefoot hunter-gatherer practices embodiment often, as her very life depends on noticing all the subtle indications of food source and danger. My Indigenous Australian friend, who is urban and educated, has retained what looks like a sixth sense in her feet which can detect the presence of shellfish in the sand six inches and more below the surface. It took me six months to learn

the knack, but I still can't read the ripple patterns on the water's surface, that are the signs of the underground life she can read.

It is not surprising that embodiment is not practised very much in the West when you understand that it was feared by the Church, who considered embodiment as sinful and likely to lead to orgies and blood sacrifices. The rhythmic pagan music of ordinary people working and dancing, was frightening to the clergy, who educated their flocks away from embodiment as much as they were able. Early church music was written without rhythm and using perfect intervals of fourths, fifths and octaves, deliberately encouraging disembodiment and heavenly thoughts. Embodying harmonies were written out of the score and only fools or heretics would use them.

Embodiment has worried the establishment in my lifetime too. The African rhythms that informed the rock movement were frowned upon in the sixties and branded "Satanic" by worried clergymen.

David Abram's theory that the development of a universally available, alphabetic, written language gave rise to the ability to think in abstract concepts, simultaneously disconnecting us from the world around us, suggests that that the more highly 'educated' we are in modern terms, the more likely we are to be living as if we were disembodied.

Being in love is perhaps as universal an experience of embodiment as I can think of. When we are in love, we notice colours, details, beauty and the feel of the air moving on our skin. We feel more alive than usual and we notice the sensuality of the textures around us. We know our loved one is calling before the telephone rings, and with our rapt attention to one another, communication and understanding occurs with the minimum of words. Rather than being an exceptional state, embodied living suggests the possibility of a life enriched by the splendour of the senses.

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