Theory to Practice

Creativity: Essential for the Adult Education Instructor and Learner

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Abstract

Adult education instructors and learners should recognize that creativity is an essential component needed to foster flexibility, openness, and the ability to tolerate uncertainty in a changing educational and social world. Since creativity is so important, this article presents some strategies for promoting creativity and explores the benefits it has for instructors, learners, and the adult education enterprise. It is implied that creativity can be learned and taught in a way that generates ingenuity and the creation of new ideas, products, programs, marketing, as well as intellectual enhancement.

Introduction

*Creativity is far more significant than knowledge in
the advancement of humankind* ---Albert Einstein

The statement above suggests that creativity is an essential and dominate factor in the promotion of lifespan knowledge and advancement. If that is the case, the adult education enterprise should value the concept and practice of creativity to enhance the teaching and learning milieu. According to Galbraith and Jones (2003), "Creativity seems to be concerned with innovation, change, reflection, tolerance, challenge, and nurturing of the unforeseen to make something a reality" (p. 19). With that in mind, the boundaries and benefits of creativity are limit-

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less. Cropley (2001) suggests that creativity can be characterized as an idea, an action, or a product, as long it is new and unfamiliar and usually results in an artistic, spiritual, or material response that is pleasing. In addition, creativity produces a good self-image that leads to the success of learners, their personal lives and selected career choices (Jones & Escue, 1990).

Creativity adds value to life and to living itself. Edelman (1999) states that, "Without creativity we would cease to exist. And even if we could exist, what kind of life would we have?" (p. 4). Rothenberg (1990) suggests that creativity elicits curiosity and, from that makes possible the most sublime human achievements, which add value to our lives. When addressing attributes of wisdom within the framework of life-cycle development, Erikson (1988) connects the concept of creativity to being wise in adulthood. Since the adult education field is comprised solely of adult learners, it is perhaps the primary reason for encouraging creativity in the classroom. In addition, it is an essential skill and attribute for the skillful instructor who values lifelong education (Galbraith, 2004, 2008).

Why should adult education encourage creativity? According to Cropley (2001), the answer lies in the success of individuals and organizations in a global marketplace and in the skills needed for successful careers. Adult education needs to take on the responsibility of fostering creativity in learners, instructors, and administrators who can function in shifting social and cultural climates. As a result, adult education needs to foster flexibility, openness, and the ability to tolerate uncertainty if it desires to help instructors and learners who are capable of creative endeavors. To that end, this article discusses how to promote creativity. In addition, it examines some benefits creativity has for instructors, learners, and the adult education organizations in which they work.

The Promotion of Creativity

Promoting and supporting creativity can be accomplished in a number of significant ways. Some are directed toward organizational dimensions, while others are focused toward the learner and instructor.

The first essential element in promoting creativity is to create a conducive environment. According to Galbraith and Jones (2003), "Whether in the classroom or in the general milieu of an organization, a conducive and inviting environment is essential to generate creative and innovative ideas, projects, or products" (p. 20). Individuals who feel a sense of trust,

openness, respect, support, and acceptance are more likely to engage in learning activities, decision-making processes, program development, as well as marketing strategies. Creativity is enhanced when organizational life, and those that comprise it, demonstrates that risk-taking is valued and encouraged. It must be continuing and ongoing for it to occur. It is so important to establish a conducive climate. Without it, all other promotional dimensions related to creativity have little meaning.

When selecting faculty, instructors, and admitting learners to various programs, it would be wise to promote for admittance those individuals who have a questioning mind and a sense for nurturing change. A basic necessity to enhancing creativity is to have instructors and learners from diverse backgrounds, with varying interests, learning and thinking styles, experiences, and who are at various stages in life cycle development. A diverse group of instructors and learners can serve as a catalyst for change and creativity within the organization, learning projects, and instructional processes.

Promoting creativity must also include personalizing the environment in which instructors and learners work and learn. It is essential to reinforce the individuality of instructors and learners by allowing some control over workplace space, furnishings, and personal items. It is also important to provide the essential equipment to conduct the duties and responsibilities required. The transformation and personalization of the environment generates the creative rhythms of the instructor and learner. Personalizing the environment also supports the experiences of instructors and learners by allowing them to put meaning to what they are doing and studying. It is a logical progression toward de-structurizing the day's activities and how time is utilized. In essence, personalizing the instructor and learner environment places a sense of control in their hands which is necessary for stimulating creativity.

A fourth factor in promoting creativity is to provide time to generate new ideas, projects, concepts, or innovative approaches to instructional, learning, or administrative processes. It is vital that appropriate time be provided to engage in such processes. Time is necessary to buffer the day-to-day tasks in which instructors and learners participate. It is a fundamental element in becoming a critically reflective thinker, which is a necessity in creating new ideas, projects, and learning opportunities. To enhance this, an organization or program may have a specific day and time of the week in which instructors and learners share ideas. This process allows participants to exchange ideas and to engage in and deal

with encounters that may arise from debate and confrontation (Galbraith & Jones, 2003). Confrontational elements in a critical discourse can be healthy if done in a respectful manner. Generating new creative ideas takes time for both instructors and learners. With a conducive and supportive environment within the organization, instructors and learners will realize institutional support for innovation.

Another factor in promoting creativity is to encourage feedback. Edelman (1999) posits that, "New ideas need to be talked through in a supportive yet objective manner" (p. 10). To provide feedback in a constructive and respectful manner, a selected individual or small group of interested individuals can be utilized to suggest any reasonable modifications that would enhance creative ideas, projects or learning programs. Individuals who provide positive feedback need to be good listeners and exhibit a questioning mind that can raise alternative assumptions to the presented innovations (Galbraith, 2004). By encouraging feedback, creative individuals are asked to engage in the process of praxis; that is, they need to engage in their creative action, reflect on the action, engage in creative action after learning from the reflective process, reflect again and so forth. While feedback is essential in the promotion of creativity, creative people must feel a sense of trust, respect, and sincerity throughout the entire process.

As suggested above, the use of groups to provide feedback is essential within the creative milieu. It is apparent that a conducive environment can provide a supportive climate for ideas and innovations to flourish. To provide a supportive group interaction, the sixth element, it is essential that some ground rules be generated that suggest ideas brought to the table are debated in an open and honest manner. Important to remember is that while it is appropriate to attack ideas, it is never acceptable to make the discourse a personal attack on the people who generated the ideas. Supportive group interaction can be a substantial means to spawn new ideas, listen to different opinions, and serve as an agent for marginal voices within the group. According to Galbraith and Jones (2003);

> The primary overall benefit of group interaction, in the promotion of creativity, is that it provides an environment comprised of imaginative individuals who bring with them a set of divergent viewpoints that ultimately encourages imaginative thinking and gets the creative juices flowing (p. 22).

The last element in the promotion process is the unplanned accidents, mistakes, and failures that occur. They are all necessary components in the process of creativity. Since creativity is a human endeavor, accidents and mistakes are inevitable. The unplanned, unexpected, and unanticipated serve as a mechanism for further reflection and innovation. One should be leery if no mistakes are made throughout the creative process. This may suggest that someone is not thinking or trying to think creatively. To be creative, those engaged in the process quickly learn that it is essential to learn from their mistakes. It provides for circumstances that lead to more critical and creative thought and action.

Benefits of Creativity

The promotion of creativity leads to varying benefits for instructors, learners, and organizations. Supporting, encouraging, advocating, and endorsing creativity seems to provide a new awareness for those involved within the creative process. Albert Einstein's quote at the beginning of this article suggests that creativity is very important. Individuals that see unimaginative, negative images of their existence often live desperate lives. They lack the necessary spark to see all the possibilities. Creativity promotes the unleashing of innovative, artistic, and imaginative experiences. Adult education has the potential to benefit from the promotion of creativity. How instructors, learners, and adult education organizations benefit from acts of creativity are examined.

Benefits to Instructors
Instructors benefit from engaging in creativity in numerous ways. A good method for finding new ideas is to attend and participate in professional association conferences in which dialoguing with fellow attendees and frequenting concurrent sessions can generate new information. In addition, the reading of professional journals, books, and reports can get the creative juices flowing. Taking these new ideas back to the classroom or seminar can begin a new and exciting creative instructional experience in terms of strategies utilized, and the incorporation of a sense of resourcefulness, and ingenuity.

The classroom becomes a place that begins to change, modify, and adapt to the possibility that innovation is a welcoming aspect when new ideas are incorporated. Learners recognize that instructors are assisting them in planning, thinking, doing, and assessing their individual needs.

Such a classroom setting promotes independence, self-confidence, and the ability to solve problems (Galbraith & Jones, 2006, 2008). Instructors who discover that teaching and learning can be a complex and diverse process will also realize that multiple methods can be used for reaching an acceptable answer to a problem or situation.

There are many instructional strategies that can be utilized to generate creativity in learners. One method can be the use of collages. The objective in this method may be to show an awareness of diversity and tolerance toward some group of individuals within our society. In this activity, learners collect items that are alike, different and so forth and create a collage that represents their insights into diversity and tolerance. The role of the instructor may be to facilitate a discussion about the topic using the learners' collages. Open discussion about assumptions underlying their work can generate new perspectives and insights (Galbraith, 2008).

Another instructional strategy is the case story, which was developed by Maslin-Ostrowski and Ackerman (2004). They state that the case story approach "is distinguished from case study in that it is both a written and an oral description of a real-life critical incident or dilemma of practice that is told from the author's perspective" (p. 303). The case story has several steps [a complete description can be found in Galbraith, 2004] which begin with the *freewrite* that addresses a question like "The obstacle for change in my organization is....? or, The obstacle to teaching adult learners for me is....?" From there they *write a case story* (step 2), *tell, listen and discuss case stories* (step 3), *reflect in small groups* (step 4), *and finally share reflections with the whole group* (step 5). This method generates a great deal of innovative, creative, and reflective thought concerning some issue. The instructor utilizing this method provides leadership, direction, and support throughout the case story process.

In general, instructors who work within organizations that support creativity find themselves more open to new ideas, and are more willing to try out new ideas, curriculum materials, and teaching strategies and methods. Another benefit is the opportunity to experiment with new types of scheduling for teachers who demonstrate innovation as well as ways of working together such as co-teaching and analyzing materials together from different perspectives. This may generate new "voices" and new topics into the curriculum. Overall, instructors can assist learners to be creative. It is possible to inspire ingenuity in learners by instructing them on how to look for new ideas, recognize novel approaches

when they see them, and assess the effectiveness of the innovative solutions they come up with. The benefits of creativity for the instructor are many. With the opportunity to promote such creativity, the process of teaching and learning is enhanced.

Benefits to Learners

Through collaborative and peer-group endeavors, creativity is generated in a most effective manner. This creates many benefits for the learner. Collaborative relationships induce opportunities for creativity. It allows for honest sharing of new ideas with people whose learning perspectives may be dissimilar. In addition, it encourages and values inclusive decision making as well as inspires effective teamwork. Flavin-McDonald and Barrett (1999) state that:

> Some of the most creative moments come from honestly sharing our *learning edge* with people whose learning edges are just a bit different....In the final analysis, being open to examining your best ideas takes something from being so-so to something that is really worth doing (p. 33).

Peer-group experiences also provide benefits to learners. Anderson (1999) suggests that in a peer-group endeavor members of the group realize they cannot rely "on leaders and experts to make the group meaningful" (p. 19). As a result, group members begin to accept or gain comfort in the group and begin to risk higher levels of participation which results in becoming more competent and confident in their abilities. This leads to an increase in self-esteem and a more positive attitude about their abilities, which results in the creation of innovative and empowering dimensions that induce creativity.

When learners are engaged in learning opportunities that consist of varying methodologies, collaboration, or peer-group experiences, they become more creative. It allows them to be innovative, incorporate a higher level of risk-taking, learn from their mistakes without fear of reprisal, and generate new ideas. Learners become more reflective and, with some assistance, more critically reflective thinkers. It allows for opportunities to draw alternative assumptions about their values, beliefs, lives, and practices. Creativity yields the acceptance of inherent contradictions and ambiguities in thought processes. That is, learners are not only ready to live with life's contradictions but will accept these contradictions as a fundamental property of thought and creativity. Learners

who are predisposed to the creative process will hopefully extend that mechanism into their own practices with their learners, whether in an instructional manner or through their administrative functions in educational or community-based programs.

Benefits to Organizations

Adult education organizations that support and advocate creativity are capable of accepting the shifting orientation of social and cultural climates. Those that foster flexibility, openness, and the ability to tolerate uncertainty are creating in instructors and learners the capability of creative endeavors. In addition, when such an environment is established in adult education, creative marketing, program development, curricula activities, and instructional processes are developed. A steady wave of new ideas and programs keep adult education fresh and responsive to the changing needs of instructors, learners, and communities they serve. Creativity is an essential process for organizations who wish to "enhance [themselves] and for others and as a way of helping [them] address new and emerging challenges...perhaps even more significantly, creativity can help us frame new problems worthy of solving" (Edelman, 1999, p. 4). Finally, organizations that advocate creativity are supporting the importance and necessity of human originality and innovation which is essential in the continuation of effective adult education enterprises.

Conclusion

Promoting creativity in instructors, learners, and adult education organizations is an essential response to the changing nature of our social, educational, political, psychological, and economic world. There are various ways of promoting creativity and in doing so benefiting the instructor, learner, and organization. It is apparent that the future growth and development of adult education resides in the ability to generate and support creative individuals and learners who can expand the possibilities of such educational organizations.

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