

How Arts Teachers Can Become Better Creativity Teachers

By Raymond Veon

Imagine you are observing an arts class. The teacher explains the assignment, gives a demonstration, and exclaims “Now, feel free to try anything—use your creativity!” The teacher then turns away, satisfied that exhorting students to “feel free” is enough to develop creative thinkers. While this scenario might seem like an exaggeration, as an arts administrator in the Atlanta Public Schools and as an instructor in Georgia State University’s undergraduate and graduate programs, I have seen it often. “So what,” you say? Let me reframe the situation by asking another question: If you were teaching high school science, would you give an assignment and then declare, “Remember to use your quantum theory!” and then walk away as if such skill and knowledge were self-evident? Without instruction, the creative process can seem as mysterious and vague as quantum theory does to a non-scientist. The point is that creativity is a sophisticated skill set and habit of mind that needs to be consciously taught, learned, and developed no less than the complex mindsets needed in other intellectually challenging disciplines. From this perspective, the key question is: How can arts teachers become better creativity teachers?

Giving formulaic lessons, emphasizing technical skills alone to make predetermined products, rather than teaching students to develop their ideas in a climate of open-ended inquiry eliminates a primary, unique benefit of arts education. This unique benefit is how to develop, shape, and use innovative ideas in non-rule governed ways and that can have multiple, divergent end-points. Creativity is not something that “just happens,” but needs constant cultivation in today’s rule- and rubric-governed school environment.

A Model of Creativity

Before proceeding, I need to make clear how I am about to use the term “image.” The term “image” is often associated only with the visual image. However, to understand this model of creativity, an image is *any* sensation generated mentally. This means that sounds, the feeling of movement, smells, colors and shapes, or reproductions of what we’ve seen can all be referred to as an image. An image, then, can be a rhythm or melody heard by the “mind’s ear,” or the feeling of thrust, weight and balance felt by the “mind’s body” as much as the vision of a butterfly seen by the “mind’s eye.” (See illustration 1). This is important because these sensory images are the starting point for the model of creativity that I am presenting. By generating, manipulating, or reframing sensory images mentally we go beyond the constraints of everyday categories and associations. Advertisers are masters at manipulating images so that we associate certain images with what they want us to value (see illustration 3).



Illustration 1

According to research, successful creativity training relies on a coherent model of creativity as opposed to a grab bag of random tricks and techniques. As a result, I’ve developed the following three stage model for thinking about creativity across the arts (see illustration 2). Based on the work of Arne Ludvigsen, each stage has its own goal:

- Stage One: Develop imagination by playing with sound, visual and kinaesthetic images and exploring the many meanings that such images might have; the result is an imaginative idea.
- Stage Two: Connect these ideas to a larger system of ideas—a thinking framework—by questioning existing hierarchies of thinking and seeing. Through an iterative process, students investigate, reveal and explore points of tension in the many aesthetic, cultural, political, personal and economic systems that surround them.

The Creative Process

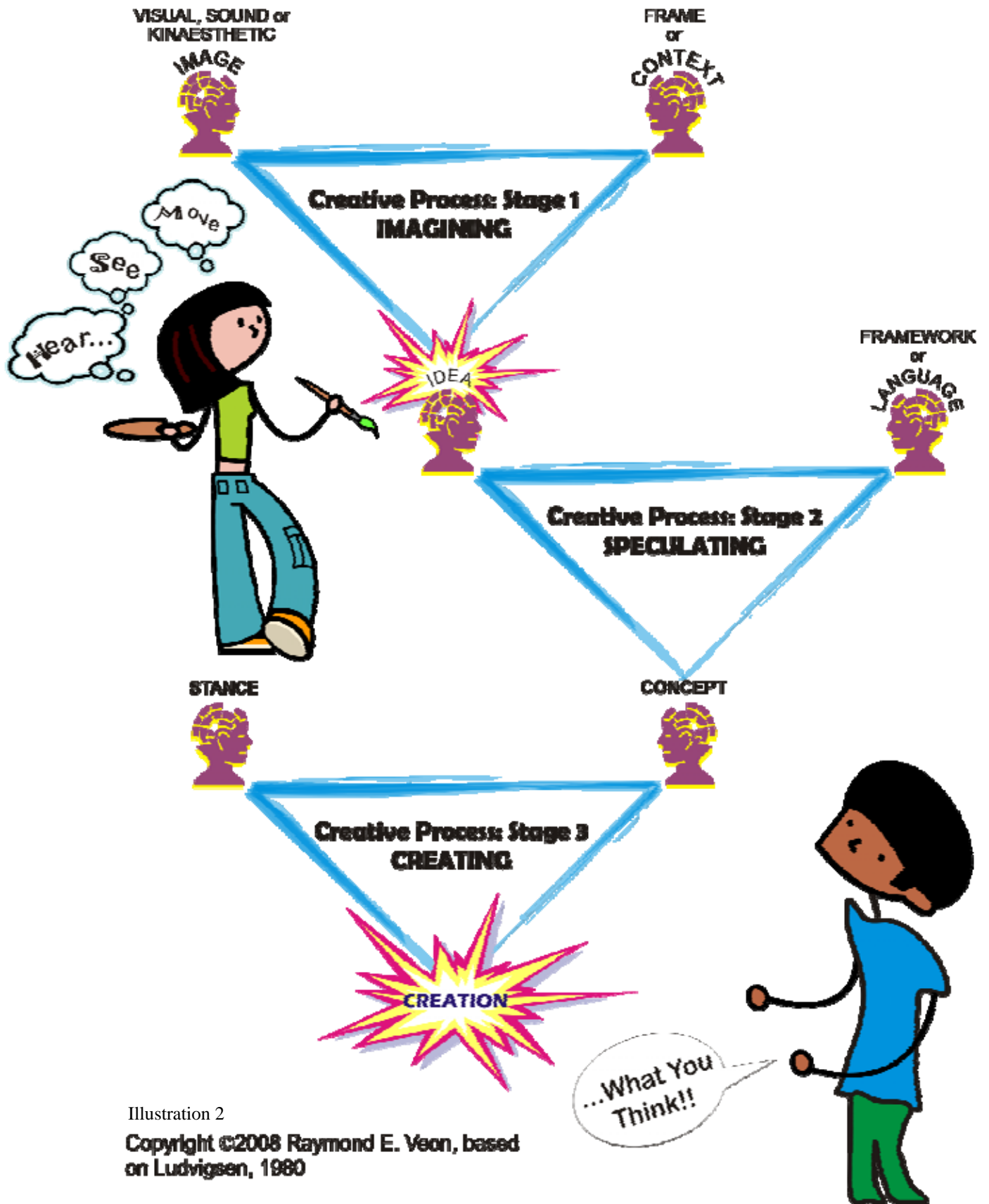


Illustration 2

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Illustration 3: HSBC advertising campaign

- Stage Three: Establish a creative stance, i.e. an approach to art making that is shaped by alternate systems of value, thought, or practice generated by the student and that is infused with sufficient passion for sustaining inquiry in the face of the unknown.

Stage One asks elementary teachers to introduce skills exploring the dynamic interplay between mental imagery (sounds, movement, and perceptions generated by the mind). For instance, in the museum, have you ever seen people glance quickly at contemporary art before spending the rest of their time reading the wall text? Confronted with the unfamiliar, people naturally look for a context, a frame of reference, to help them understand it. I've heard people question whether the work of John Cage is really music for the same reason. But just as a diamond can mean different things depending on the physical and social setting in which it is placed—for instance, think of the meanings a diamond might have when found in a Valentine's Day brooch, a wedding ring, a crown, a drill, or an exhibit in a courtroom trial—so too images change meaning depending on their context (see illustration 3). Therefore, the objectives in Stage One challenge students to develop imaginative ideas through two fundamentally different strategies. The first strategy is image-based: students manipulate or generate images (whether sound, visual or based on the sensation of movement) until they come up with an unexpected result that cannot be easily labeled or categorized. The second strategy is context-based: by combining or dissecting the everyday labels and associations we use to categorize the sounds, sights and movements of life, students generate suggestive or unusual meanings that invite open-ended wonder. As shown by the behavior of people in museums, these strategies play on the mind's tendency to seek meaning when shown a hard-to-label image. Other examples of this tendency include Rorschach tests, where people find imagery in abstract inkblots, and the Thematic Apperception Test, where people tell stories about uncaptioned photographs that reveal more about themselves than the "truth" of the picture.

This reverses the routine of everyday schooling. Teachers who want creative students need to encourage risk-taking and mental playfulness. Instead of acquiring knowledge by casting the meaning of symbols and the rules for combining them in mental cement, creativity teachers ask students to play with the building blocks of ideas—e.g. visual images, sounds, movements and the different frames of reference in which we place them. Multiple possibilities for combining such imagery and meaning become possible, none of which are necessarily privileged over the others until a student identifies one as worth pursuing. There are many reasons why these skills are valuable, including:

- Being able to reframe experience from multiple perspectives develops disciplinary mastery and enables us to find unique, novel problems—and finding problems where others fail to see them is both a key factor in creativity and is a valued workforce skill.

- Mental skills that enable us to re-categorize what we think and experience are valued by college programs, which are increasingly emphasizing conceptual skills.

Stage Two is the level at which students begin deploying their knowledge and skills in tandem as a coherent artistic language. Bodies of work at this level are marked by an emerging independence and a reflective, autonomous practice informed primarily by the field of visual art, but which may also rely heavily on other disciplines or concerns beyond the art world. Examples of these concerns range from issues of power and identity arising from the economic, social and political realms, to the formative contexts of family, peer-group, and classroom, and to works that employ intense feeling, fantasy, irony, parody and humor. The goal of Stage Two is to organize these divergent sources as an expressive language that gives voice to each student's stories and aesthetic aspirations.

Teachers who want creative students need to encourage a spirit of healthy skepticism and deep inquiry. In Stage Two, intermediate teachers help students see the musical, visual, and performance arts as meeting places in which different systems of thinking, hearing, seeing and experiencing come together. By questioning the systems of logic and value embedded in our visual and aural environment, in our behavior and inner psychological worlds, in cultural assumptions, and in socio-political frameworks, creators reveal points of tension and unity amidst the competing networks of meaning that surround us. When it comes to exploring and expressing these insights, creators of all ages are often unsure of what steps come next. They know that stepping out of the proverbial box means that the end-product and the process leading to it are initially unclear. Thus, like the first stage, Stage Two is envisioned as a form of open-ended research in which a creator shapes the creative process as it unfolds. The value for students is that they learn how to proceed in the face of not knowing and to discover what to do when easy, pre-existing exemplars no longer help them chart the course forward.

In my experience, some arts teachers equate creativity only with brainstorming quick, random, whacky ideas. But I see the creative process as a long-term, complex process that orchestrates many cognitive and emotional skills. So, I encourage teachers to see creativity as interconnected and dialectical, characterized by ongoing reflection and critical thinking.

Finally, if creativity is "thinking outside of the box" then, in **Stage Three**, it is also building a new box within which to think. However, a better metaphor might be that at this stage creators assemble the unique elements of their artistic "genetic code" into strands of creative DNA. These strands will be unique for each creator and will combine to generate an on-going series of unique challenges and problems revolving around a creator's aspirations. In Stage Three, teachers help students transform the vague, precarious mental terrain that they have encountered in the artistic process into a creative stance. Having borrowed this term from Howard Gardner, I see the creative stance as being composed of five separate elements that blend together as a kind of creative DNA or unique, generative mindset. The elements of this mindset are: objectives that are unique to an individual; a personal rationale that provides the emotional motivation to navigate temporary failures and the courage for enduring the confusion of not knowing the next step; a personal viewpoint that sees problems, tensions, and connections where others do not or in unique ways; preferred working methods; and personal standards that are adequate to and reflect a creator's emerging vision.

Questions to Ask:
Did you risk and reframe?
Did you question, intersect,
and connect? Did you
explore and
exploit points of tension?
How does this come out of
your own creative stance?

So, how can arts teachers become better creativity teachers? One answer is to have a road map based on a coherent model of creativity. It is not that we need to answer the question "What is creativity?" for all time, but rather that we can achieve significant results by choosing from those models available to us. It is my hope that this model can be used to help ensure the creative development of students in an era in which teaching to standardized tests too often short-circuits the creative growth of students.