

A New Kind of Innovation

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Students in ArtWell's Art of Growing Leaders class at Providence Center work together with teaching artists to create a mural for their building, titled "Unite to Fight for What's Right."

Haigen Pearson

In today's world, conformity and convergent thinking are valued above creativity. And why shouldn't they be? Creativity is messy. It encourages out of the box thinking. It multiplies possibilities, it eschews easy answers, it takes up time and space. It forces us to ignore the tried-and-true route laying before us, in favor of blazing a new trail. It requires inner work -- coming to terms with our

assumptions, our fears, and our beliefs, and turning them into something new.

In cities like Philadelphia, where funding for our already under-resourced public schools is contingent on test scores and standardized student performance, teachers are faced with impossible demands and not enough support, on top of too many students per classroom, each with complex needs and often healing from the impact of personal and systemic trauma. The educators we work with recognize that even testing companies and their economic and lobbying power inherently block pathways to reforming our current educational system. There is hardly time left for play and connection, and creativity is sadly lost and not valued as essential.

Even in professional spaces, the need to be productive and get ahead often takes precedence over taking the time and space to imagine creative solutions. There is a prevailing sense of individuality and competition -- if I don't work overtime for this client, or complete this report, or take on this extra project, someone else will. That kind of pressure leaves no room for imagining and collaboration.

Even NASA has studied the creativity that exists inherently inside all of us, as an exploration of the space we possess within. They designed a creativity test to help identify prospective innovative engineers and scientists. It worked so well, they decided to try it on children enrolled

in the Head Start program. At five years old, 98 percent of these children registered as creative geniuses. At 10 years old, only 30 percent of those children exhibited the same level of creativity. This same test, administered to adults, only unearthed a two percent rate of active creative energy.

This is why, for the last 19 years, ArtWell has been working to establish safe, welcoming, and inclusive spaces within schools and communities where creativity can thrive.

ArtWell programs utilize art as a tool for reflection. We introduce resources and practices that our students and clients may not always be familiar or comfortable with. Paint, paper, poetry, percussion -- it's so easy to look at these things and tell ourselves, "I'm not artistic. I can't do that. I can't use that the right way."

It's easy to feel nervous about trying something new in school, where you're expected to remember, to memorize, to behave, to perform, or at work, where you're expected to excel, to compromise, to finish, to succeed. But here's the big secret -- it's about so much more than how to draw, or write a poem, or drum.

It's about using these tools -- these non-linear, out of the box, loud, messy processes -- to explore concepts and ideas and the kind of creative imagining that our world leaves little space for. We could probably stand at the front of the room and talk about a big idea, like trust, if we

wanted to. But at ArtWell, we don't presume to have the answers. We believe they're already inside our participants.

So, we introduce an activity like mask-making, where teams of people take turns carefully applying plaster to each other's faces to capture their unique likenesses, or interview poems, where duos ask each other personal questions and create thoughtful lines of prose that encompass their partner's many facets. We create meaningful moments where people come face to face with the concept, and figure out how they feel about it in a new way.

Our goal isn't to teach our participants to create the perfect mask or poem that deserves to hang in a museum or get published in a book (although if they do -- that's great!). Our goal is to introduce creative processes along with the interplay of our values: the power of imagination, healing, community, spirituality, social justice, and love. When this happens, people connect with life's basic truths and gifts, and can explore them in a space that is open, welcoming, and completely free of judgment.

When this happens, an element of control seems to release. The need to act a certain way suddenly vanishes. In this space, where participants can experiment, and explore -- and maybe even fail -- without being measured or graded or evaluated, new things can happen. New pathways to old problems can form. The walls we build

around ourselves for protection can come down. The joy of discovery builds, along with awe in seeing the strengths and struggles of classmates and colleagues with new eyes and bolder empathy.

In looking at today's world, when we ask ourselves what kind of skills we really need to be successful, what do we think of? The ability to think outside the box. The willingness to work with others in a trusting way. The knowledge that we don't always have the answers, but we can learn and grow and find things out. Creativity. Innovation. Teamwork.

And yet, the structures and systems in which we learn and work are built to support the antithesis of these concepts. At this moment in history, we have no choice but to look forward and imagine what's possible. We are living in a critical time, when issues surrounding politics, social justice, and the environment seem to be at a tipping point.

If we don't inspire our students, our colleagues, and ourselves to engage in creative imagining, and messy, out-of-the-box thinking that can take us beyond our current reality, beyond our circumstances, beyond our old beliefs and lessons and assumptions -- how can we collectively create a better and more inclusive world? How can we tap into the innate creativity that lives in us, that is programmed into our DNA, but got pushed down and forgotten among the chaos of reality?

Realizing this vision will take a major cultural shift in what we value and prioritize as a society. It will take an increased investment in the arts education and creative opportunities from birth through adulthood that would make our schools arts rich. It will require workplaces to rethink professional development and strive to build creative capacity and innovation.

It's going to be messy, and it's going to take a lot of time and space, and it's going to be hard to ignore the tried-and-true path laying before us in favor of blazing new trails. It's going to force us to look inside ourselves and find something that we believed was not useful, or maybe not even real. A new kind of innovation, where we already have all the answers we need.

Works Cited

¹ Naimna, Linda. "Can Creativity Be Taught? Here's What the Research Says." *Creativity at Work*, Creativity at Work, 21 Jan. 2019, www.creativityatwork.com/2012/03/23/can-creativity-be-taught/.