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Creative Learning A Necessity Not An Option

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N Lajamanu, a remote town in Australia's Northern Territory, Shane White and Maxwell Tasman can sometimes be found in 'the old BRACS room', an openaccess editing suite, making music videos and cultural documentaries. These and other digital artefacts are building the Our Story community database in the local 'LKC' ('Library and Knowledge Centre'). Even in their spare time, these two youth media workers make films just for fun, learning new technologies with a fearless attitude and enthusiasm. They embody the digital literacy and innovation that is burgeoning amongst their peers, and transforming indigenous culture and stereotypes. Shane and Maxwell are profiled along with many others in Learning Spaces: Youth, Literacy and New Media in Remote Indigenous Australia (2012), a book on a research project that shows "how it is possible to re-engage young Indigenous adults lost to regular schooling systems, with education and life long learning."¹ The secret, say the researchers, lies in seven design principles for making spaces of learning. Young people thrive when you allow them to: have control; 'muck around'; be learners that learn; grow new roles and responsibilities; practice languages and express identities in multimodal ways; be enterprising; and engage with the world. The secret, in other words, lies in Creative Learning.

Finding an agreed definition of Creative Learning is difficult, even with the many books, papers and policy reports on the subject. It's because there are at least as many interpretations of it as there are teachers and learners. Instead, it is often referenced as a learning *style* or culture, a pedagogical approach that uses contemporary and imaginative forms of enquiry to make accessing and generating knowledge a highly engaging, relevant, and rewarding experience.



My Name is Joma and Iam a good boy. I wish I had big house for all My family. I am a fung person I like making people laugh. Creative Learning is aspirational, and can be characterised by what UK expert Anna Craft calls "Possibility Thinking", or the art of asking "What If...".² Julian Sefton-Green, another UK leader in the field, describes it as "...teaching that allows students to use their imaginations, have ideas, generate multiple possible solutions to problems, communicate in a variety of media and in general to 'think outside the box'."³

A common theme is that exploration and interest are profoundly student-driven. "If relevance and control and ownership apply", says academic Bob Jeffrey from the USA, "there is an increased chance of creative learning, and when something new is created, there is significant change or transformation in the pupil, ie: an innovation experience".⁴ Creative teachers – those who teach creatively and/or promote creativity in others⁵ - design and foster the environments, relationships and programs that can spark this inspiration and agency. They also promote reciprocity, acting not as the 'sage on the stage' but the 'guide on the side'⁶, reflecting and responding dynamically to the learner's experiences and attitudes as they unfold.



Five key behaviours that Creative Learning seeks to encourage include "asking questions, making connections, imagining what might be, exploring options and reflecting critically".⁷ Seeding these habits grows more than just a love of (life long) learning. In stimulating imagination and curiosity other capacities are discovered and strengthened too, like the ability to tolerate ambiguity, to take risks, to think independently and empathically, and to be resilient, collaborative and resourceful. Add in some top rate digital skills and, according to much of the research, you'll have what it takes to navigate the complexities and uncertainty of the 21st century environment, a readiness for unpredictable futures.

Creative Learning is not a new idea; but it is one whose time has come. The conversation about it has been bubbling up amongst scholars, governments and teachers since the 1990's, when creativity and learning were taken out of their traditional fields of psychology, arts or education and explored in other, interdisciplinary contexts.



CREATIVE LEARNING IS NOT A NEW IDEA; BUT IT IS ONE WHOSE TIME HAS COME. Today's efflorescence of idea festivals, innovation summits, and national think tanks shows how widely accepted the need for more creativity has become. These events exist in homage to earlier advocates like Howard Gardner (Multiple Intelligence, 1983) and Csikszentmihalyi (Flow Theory, 1990). The evidence of benefits claimed by pioneers of the Creative Learning community has only mounted in the intervening years and is re-affirmed by research today. For example, teachers in a 2008 European Union funded project, *Creative Learning and Student Perspectives (CLASP*), observed that the young people engaged had "...increased motivation, emotional development, a realisation of abilities and enhanced self-confidence".⁸ Findings like these have built the critical mass that fuels the Creative Learning imperative.

The value of creativity is now largely unquestioned; it has become another prerequisite for personal wellbeing. Just as physical and mental fitness are seen as essential to our overall health, so is it considered natural and fulfilling to exercise our creative muscles, and to optimize our opportunities to learn. Creativity and learning help our identity formation and self-actualisation project, rewarding us with positive emotions and, among other things, enhanced relationships, an increased sense of wonder and empathy, and the pleasures of making meaning.⁹ Ultimately, the 'magic' of Creative Learning is that it enables people "to think differently about themselves, their lives and the world in which they live".¹⁰



BEYOND PERSONAL FULFILLMENT AND VITALITY, CREATIVITY IS NOW SOUGHT AFTER FOR ITS EXTRINSIC VALUE.



Beyond personal fulfillment and vitality, creativity is now sought after for its extrinsic value. As hundreds of experts tell us, knowledge and creative capital drive and dictate economic growth, social prosperity and environmental security. Hence, governments across the world are keen to incubate more of it, acknowledging that the innovation activity it fosters gives countries a competitive edge. We see it in the rise of the creative and cultural industries, which the Australian Bureau of Statistics recently reported as contributing more than \$86 billion annually to the national economy, overtaking domains such as the transport industry or welfare sector, and which, in terms of GDP in this area, now "outranks that of countries including Britain, the US, Canada and Spain."¹¹ The recognition of creativity and innovation has prompted a flow of public and private funding for initiatives in research, policy and programming, particularly in the United Kingdom, Europe, the United States of America, and Australia. As well as scoping the complex and varied aspects of these domains, this work has underscored the crucial role of education in building the creative capacities of any workforce or citizenry.

Teaching and learning for creativity is now recognized across the world. China, in the last decade, for example, has introduced a policy of Creative Learning that prioritizes early childhood¹². In the Gulf Corporation Council (GCC) countries¹³, which have been undergoing extensive educational reform, leaders understand "the need for schools to support creative learning and prepare students to become creative citizens"¹⁴, and financial resources reflect this. Middle Eastern academic Aziz Al-Horr reminds us, however, that creative thinking skills are "culturally practiced and acquired. Hence, it requires a culture that fosters it appropriately, something beyond the adoption of textbooks or technologies".¹⁵



OVERHAULING PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE AND MAINSTREAMING CREATIVE LEARNING IS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE.

As the experiences of Hong Kong and India reveal, even when the need for Creative Learning is formally recognised, meaningful change can still be thwarted by overburdened and rigid education systems with a lack of teaching support. The result can be a static curriculum that leaves little time for students to imaginatively or autonomously explore.¹⁶ Beyond policy provisions, says a report for the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), there must be more than a "tinkering at the edges".¹⁷

Overhauling pedagogical practice and mainstreaming Creative Learning is now the biggest challenge, even in countries that have been leading the way. In one of the most watched TED Talks (over 31 million views) the passionate and popular creativity expert, Ken Robinson from the UK, insists that teaching creativity has become as urgent a priority as teaching literacy. In too many school settings, however, he says "we get educated out if it" and multiple types of intelligence are denied.¹⁸ Despite the range of approaches and benefits now evidenced, the Creative Learning culture still needs building. In Europe, for instance, a 2010 report on the study of creativity and innovation in Education in the EU Member States notes discrepancies between policy and practice. It found that while creativity and innovation were present in school culture and classroom practice they were not yet sufficiently acknowledged or prioritized.¹⁹ "Like any habit", notes Robert Sternberg of Oklahoma State University, "creativity can be encouraged or discouraged", and promoting it requires consistent opportunity, encouragement and reward.²⁰

To make the lofty ideas around 21st century education more tangible, the OECD has established the "Innovative Learning Environments" project.²¹ Part of its brief has been to seek out existing models of best practice. Encouragingly, some of those chosen have been found in Australia. Alberton Primary School in South Australia was one of 120 international exemplars nominated. If you are a student here, your day unfolds a little differently than at most other Australian schools. Your Home Class, for example, has a mix of 5-12 years olds and two teachers. You undertake daily 'wellbeing' activities to cultivate your 'relaxed alertness', and negotiate your own Student Learning Plan around a schoolwide theme or question; 'Discovery Time', builds your disciplinary and multidisciplinary knowledge through play-based inquiry, with teachers prompting and questioning you for appropriate challenge; some of your time is spent in the Children's Parliament to make decisions on school matters and allow for an authentic student voice; and you are as familiar with ipads and other technologies as you are a 'Weekly Reflection Time' diary that maps your learning journey across months and years. Amongst the numerous benefits of Alberton's approach, the research shows, are higher results in national literacy and numeracy tests, lower behaviourial issues and greater confidence and initiative in students. This is all the more significant given that 90% of students are from low socio-economic backgrounds and 30% are indigenous.²²

As this example shows, Australia is at times at the forefront of global trends. In the last 25 years, there have been distinct policy eras that evidence the rise of the creativity and innovation agenda nationally.²³ While they include a range of sector-led initiatives and research efforts, they can be marked by key Prime Ministerial reports, whose titles alone epitomize the narrative of desire for new and inspired ways of living, working and educating.²⁴





With such a sustained vision for a more creative nation, it is no surprise that Australia's education policy has shifted accordingly. In 2008 *The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*²⁵ outlined an agreement made by all States and Territories to pursue two foci: that "Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence"; and that "All young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens". ²⁶ Soon after this statement, a paper released by the Australian Council for Education Research (ACER), *Touching the future: Building skills for life and work*, exposed the challenge involved in reconciling such aspirations with the current education system.²⁷ Some may be hoping that the current project of designing and implementing a new national curriculum will function as an opportunity to refresh and reboot.

A persistent problem, it must be noted, is how creativity and Creative Learning can be reliably measured. One of the issues is that certain forms of accountability and testing do not always capture the impact of such endeavours.²⁸ The controversial *National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy* (NAPLAN), a standardized exam that currently ranks the quality of Australian schools, is a case in point. In the words of the Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA), "Multiple choice test items cannot measure attributes like creativity, critical thinking, resilience, motivation, persistence, curiosity, empathy, self-awareness and self-discipline. They cannot measure deep understanding."²⁹ Also worrying is ALEA's contention that, "The over emphasis on NAPLAN is reducing classroom opportunities to teach and learn in creative ways".³⁰

Encounters with Creative Learning practices in schools are frequently enabled through partnerships. In Australia, sharing responsibility for education provision with community organisations and networks has been highly encouraged,³¹ with proven benefits for better learning outcomes.³² Our cultural institutions, such as galleries, libraries and museums, excel in offering a range of dynamic school programs.³³ The Museum of Contemporary Art, for example, now has a National



ARTS EDUCATORS KNOW WELL THE POWER OF CREATIVE LEARNING.

Centre for Creative Learning, boasting a deluxe range of spaces and state-of-the art facilities. On the west coast, the school's program at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, *Spark_Lab*, is premised on building innovation skills through working with groundbreaking artists. Programs like these frequently revive the relevance of curricula for students and teachers, extending it even. Such institutions will often also have Creative Learning opportunities for adults, families, and young people outside of school.

Arts educators know well the power of Creative Learning. They have been building a rigorous evidence base for their teaching domain for decades to counter tendencies to devalue it. Recently, a major longitudinal study in America reported that "Teenagers and young adults of low socio-economic status (SES) who have a history of in-depth arts involvement show better academic outcomes than do low-SES youth who have less arts involvement. They earn better grades and demonstrate higher rates of college enrollment and attainment".³⁴ Similarly, the results of the *Creative Partnerships* program in the UK, which saw hundreds of schools partner with cultural institutions, found the experience "provided rich inspiration for learners, fostering creative skills such as risk-taking, improvisation, resilience and collaboration, and contributing to raised confidence and aspirations".³⁵ The claims are echoed in Australian projects too. Most recently, a large-scale longitudinal study undertaken by the University of Sydney and the Australia Council for the Arts³⁶ revealed that, "Students who are involved in the arts have higher school motivation, engagement in class, self-esteem, and life satisfaction".³⁷ Other projects are reviewed in, *The Arts and Australian Education: Realising potential*³⁸, an ACER report that foregrounds why "the Arts is natural and necessary for all children and young people as part of their learning".³⁹ The evidence gathering continues, however. Currently, the Sydney Story Factory, a creative writing centre in the heart of Sydney, is conducting Australia's first long-term evaluation of the creative writing process and its impact. While primarily designed to improve the creative writing skills of young people, the dynamic range of workshops (and subsequent publications) also aim to enhance self-confidence and resilience, hone empathy, and develop a love of writing *and* learning.⁴⁰

Creative Learning though, it must be stressed, is not limited to the arts. And it does not need to be large scale. For instance, one Queensland science teacher founded the *BioStories* project as a way of re-enthusing students in the subject.⁴¹ The model is based on hybridized writing activities. It requires students to work through a sequence of story templates with a topic like 'biosecurity' or 'fracking', supported by information rich websites from industry. This work leads into an open writing exercise where technical information has to be woven with narrative conventions and everyday contexts. The student's original stories are shared online and critiqued amongst peers. The teacher, Stephen Ritchie, and his team of research collaborators, say the novel approach has significantly improved student understanding, attitudes and enjoyment of science learning. The success of the pilot project subsequently attracted funding from the Australian Research Council, to investigate emotional learning in the enhancement of scientific literacy in young people.⁴²



CREATIVE LEARNING IS ACTIVE LEARNING, WHICH IS WHY IT IS SO SUCCESSFUL AT BUILDING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT.

> Creative Learning is active learning, which is why it is so successful at building student engagement. It puts the life into learning by appealing to our cognitive, emotional and motivational selves. It recognises that we all learn in different ways, that we learn better when there is relevance, and that learning can be collaborative and social. And because it offers wider strategies for skilling and achievement, Creative Learning equalises the playing field, reaching out to those who have been disaffected and alienated from education. Shirley Brice Heath, a linguistic and anthropologist renowned for her work on how we learn, has said "...in times of rapid technological change that reaches into the most intimate aspects of human relations and socialisation, change in learning must come".43 Creative Learning, it would seem, makes that change possible. Teachers with a classroom practice, principals with the power to affect school-wide agendas, philanthropists who can support innovation, curators of public education programs, and policy-makers or parents who are growing the workforce team of tomorrow – each of us must embrace and foster Creative Learning opportunities. Only then will the gift of education be truly worth giving.



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PHOTO CREDITS

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