The Importance of Creativity

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“The imagination is more important than knowledge.”
—Albert Einstein

Why Study Creativity?

The International Center for Studies in Creativity at Buffalo State, State University of New York, lists “12 solid reasons.” Here they are, in bold. (The explanations are mine.)

1. Development of “your Potential.”

The Human Potential Movement, which blossomed in the 1960’s, has taught us that being fully human is not just about eliminating pathology but also about reaching our highest potential. As the old army recruiting poster said, “Be the Best that You Can Be.” According to Abraham Maslow’s famous hierarchy, we fulfill our needs in this order: physiological, safety, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. We must first have air, water, and food; then we need to have a safe place to live; then we need to have friends and/or a group; next we
need to feel good about our accomplishments; and at last we need to experience actualization of our full potential. In his later years Maslow added an even higher need: “transcendence,” the need to transcend our narrow identities and expand our awareness. It is with these last two needs in mind that I wanted to write this book. In order to achieve self-actualization and transcendence, we need to maximize our creativity.


Thomas L. Friedman (2006, p. 150) sums up this idea succinctly:

If Americans and Europeans want to benefit from the flattening of the world and the interconnecting of all the markets and knowledge centers, they will all have to run at least as fast as the fastest lion—and I suspect that lion will be China, and I suspect that will be pretty darn fast.

Friedman calls our new world “flat” because technology has connected us and eliminated many hierarchies. Bloggers are competing with standard news outlets. Megacorporations are now competing all over the world, and one entrepreneur with a computer and an idea can compete as well. Friedman says that since the demolition of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, and the mid-nineties proliferation of the Windows PC, followed by the explosion of the World Wide Web, we are all in competition with one another, and the best ideas will win.
3. “Effective Use of Human Resources.”

Because of the “flat world” mentioned above, we will have to learn to use our human resources wisely. Outsourcing and offshoring mean that jobs in the developed world are moving—to India, to Indonesia, and anywhere that the same job can be done more cheaply and efficiently. How can we compete in the new global economy?

Peter D. Hart Research Associates asked this question of U.S. employers. In 2006 the firm interviewed 305 employers with a staff of at least 25 and conducted focus groups with executives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Fairfax, Virginia; and Atlanta, Georgia. Overwhelmingly, these employers said that they wanted to hire new workers who had the “soft skills” provided by a liberal education: among them, teamwork (76%), oral and written communication skills (73%), critical thinking and analytical skills (70%), the ability to be innovative and think creatively (70%), and the ability to solve complex problems (64%). In addition, employers felt that colleges did not place enough emphasis on these skills: teamwork (76%), oral and written communication skills (73%), critical thinking and analytical skills (73%), the ability to be innovative and think creatively (70%), and the ability to solve complex problems (64%) [Emphasis mine]. I got a similar message from the industry advisory board of our college in January, 2001. Using the material in this book in a classroom or workshop setting will access all of these skills; simply reading the book will, obviously, help with creativity skills.

4. Discovery of “New and Better Ways to Solve Problems.”

See the survey listed above. With critical thinking you can break problems into parts and critique them; with creative thinking you can synthesize ideas and have the “aha” moment that leaps beyond logic. Richard Ogle (20070 says that imagination isn’t just another form of thinking. It is a discontinuous leap based upon what he
calls “idea spaces”—nodes of influence where “the extended mind” shares ideas with others.

5. “Development of Society.”

Here’s what Daniel Pink (2005, PP. 2-3) has to say:

For nearly a century, Western society in general, and American society in particular, has been dominated by a form of thinking and an approach to life that is narrowly reductive and deeply analytical. . . . But that is changing. Thanks to an array of forces—material abundance that is deepening our nonmaterial yearnings, globalization that is shipping white-collar work overseas, and powerful technologies that are eliminating certain kinds of work altogether—we are entering a new age. . . . [While] “left-brain” capabilities powered the Information Age. . . . the capabilities we once thought of as frivolous—the “right-brain” qualities of inventiveness, empathy, joyfulness, and meaning—increasingly will determine who flourishes and who flounders.

In other words, the new global culture demands creativity. Walter Isaacson (2007) says that in this new global economy, “A society’s competitive advantage will come not from how well its schools teach the multiplication and periodic table, but from how well they stimulated imagination and creativity.” (pp. 6-7).


When you study the notebooks of Leonardo, the design of Brunelleschi’s dome, the specifics of Newton’s experiment with prisms, or the process used by Einstein or Feynman to generate ideas, you will have a bag of tools that you can apply to your own life. In addi-
tion, you will enrich your mind by being exposed to some great art and thinking.

7. Part of Being Human.

You may think that you are not creative, but you are. Most psychologists believe that like any other skill, creativity operates on a continuum, from the “Creativity with a capital C” that denotes the thinkers listed above to the “everyday creativity” you can apply to cooking or amateur art. By studying some processes and procedures, you can learn how to enhance the creativity you have.

8. Augmentation of your “Mental Health.”

If we are prevented from exercising our full potential, we can feel depressed or even ill. Psychologist Martin Seligman (2004), who calls creativity one of the basic human virtues, narrates this moving example (italics his):

*At age 68, Elizabeth Layton was a retired homemaker and aging grandmother, living out her final years in a small prairie town in Kansas. . . . There was really nothing outstanding about her except for one fact: she frequently suffered profound depression. Indeed, for more than three decades she had undergone all kinds of therapy, including drugs and electroshock. Nothing really helped, but she managed to persevere. And then disaster struck. Her youngest son died after a prolonged illness, plunging her into the darkest despair ever. On several occasions she contemplated suicide as the only exit from her seemingly insurmountable depression. Yet following up her sister’s wise suggestion, she enrolled in a drawing class. Elizabeth’s art teacher recognized her elderly student’s talent even before the course was completed. Elizabeth just loved to draw and draw and draw, creating one sketch after another with great facility and*
expressiveness. Besides allowing her to release pent-up feelings and beliefs—about death, sadness, AIDS, racism, nuclear war, American commercialism, and other personal and social issues—painting gave Elizabeth something to look forward to each day. She found her mission in life. Her works began to be displayed in art museums and galleries, first locally and then in a traveling exhibit that toured the nation. By the time she died in 1993, she had produced nearly a thousand drawings that made a deep impression on admirers all over the United States. To be sure, Elizabeth will not go down in history as a Michelangelo or a Picasso. But that was never her intention. . . . The significant fact is that creativity allowed her to live out her final 15 years with a joy and a sense of purpose that she had been denied all the previous decades of her life. Moreover, while pursuing her vision, she managed to bring happiness and meaning to others. (p. 110)

Creativity, however we practice it, is part of our higher need for self-actualization. Industrial engineers have come to realize that the old assembly line jobs, with their mind-numbing monotony, have an adverse effect on workers.

9. “Growing Body of Interest.”

Since John Guilford addressed the American Psychological Association in 1950 to recommend a study of creativity, there has been a growing interest in the area. Psychologists now study both the process and the product. They conduct experiments, review case studies, and are defining what creativity is and how it functions.

A rich diversity of materials is now available on creativity, from the popular to the academic or the pragmatic to the theoretical. Specialized approaches also abound. Biographies of scientists like Barbara McClintock and artists like Michelangelo illuminate their creative processes. The business community regularly comments on what it calls “innovation,” and in 2006 the academic liberal arts associa-


tion, AAC&U, released an entire issue on creativity as one of its *Peer Review* magazines. Between 1920 and 1950, “out of the 121,000 titles listed in *Psychological Abstracts* . . . only 186 dealt with creativity. . . From the late 1960’s until 1991, almost 9,000 references have been added to the creativity literature.” 

See the bibliography at the end of this book for many examples.

There are creativity courses springing up all over, from MIT to Stanford, from Arizona State to the University of Georgia. The creativity class in the Design Department at Stanford was featured in the San Francisco Chronicle, May 15, 2013.

10. Application to “All Disciplines.”

One of my colleagues, upon being told of creativity in science, engineering, math, business, and maritime transportation, exclaimed, “And I thought creativity was just an artsy-fartsy thing!”

Not at all! Creativity is all around us, even in the everyday objects we use. For instance, Daniel Pink (2004) alludes to an aesthetically remarkable toilet brush, to be had at Target for $5.99 and “designed by Michael Graves, a Princeton University architecture professor and one of the most renowned architects and product designers in the world” (p. 34). Pink says, “We may not all be Dali or Degas. But today we must all be designers” (p. 69).

11. Contribution to “Effective Leadership.”

A leader today must know how to be creative and to inspire creativity in others. A good example is U.S. Captain Michael D. Abrashoff, who commanded what he called *The Best Damn Ship in the Navy* (2004). He states his philosophy as follows: “I worked hard to create a climate that encouraged quixotic pursuits and celebrated the freedom to fail. I never once reprimanded a sailor for attempting to solve a problem or reach a goal. I wanted my people to feel em-
powered, so they could think autonomously” (p. 34). In the modern maritime world, the empowerment that supports both creativity and leadership occurs in the system of Bridge Resource Management.


Thomas L. Friedman (2006) says that in our fast-changing global economy, “Average Joe has to become special, specialized, synthesizing, or adaptable Joe” (p. 367). The world of the future belongs to the lifelong learner, someone willing to explore new ideas.

In U.S. colleges the learning process can seem fragmented. You take one course, do a final and paper; take another course, do a final and project. It can seem that all you’re doing is accumulating credits, checking off the boxes on a list. But when you think creatively, you transfer ideas from one course to another, synthesizing knowledge and creating new knowledge from it. This sort of skill that will make you happy, productive, and successful all your life. Daniel Pink (2005) says,

The last few decades have belonged to a certain kind of person with a certain kind of mind—computer programmers who could crank code, lawyers who could craft contracts, MBAs who could crunch numbers. But the keys to the kingdom are changing hands. The future belongs to a very different kind of person with a very different kind of mind—creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers, and meaning makers. These people—artists, inventors, designers, storytellers, caregivers, consolers, big picture thinkers—will now reap society’s richest rewards and share its greatest joys. (p. 1)

So here are “12 solid reasons” to study creativity. Can you think of any others?
References


Notes

1 Qtd. In Isaacson, p. 7—but also so well-known a comment that I have a rubber stamp imprinted with it.

2 This document is adapted from the Introduction to *Creative Synergy*, my unpublished manuscript.

3 These statistics are quoted in Feist & Runco, 1993, p. 272, as cited in Albert & Runco, 1999 p. 17.