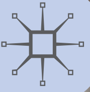

CREATIVITY, EDUCATION AND THE ARTS

Inquiry-Based Learning Through the Creative Arts for Teachers and Teacher Educators

Amanda Nicole Gulla
Molly Hamilton Sherman

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Creativity, Education and the Arts

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Series Editor's Preface

The "Upside-Down" of Creative Education in Pandemic Times

To regard this book as simply a "pedagogical," education one, or a book on creativity, is not the whole story. This book responds to the sudden psychic, material and emotional shifts in teaching and learning that have been required in the COVID-shattered 2020 academic year, and how creativity helped guide these teacher-scholars—and their students—through the uncertainty, but that is not the whole of it either. Amanda Gulla and Molly Sherman have written a book that deeply interweaves democracy and the arts, a beacon through the storm of universal assaults on the arts, humanities, and education worldwide, a keenly needed talisman of the power schooling to be more than "work-readiness."

The philosopher Maxine Greene (1997), whose aesthetic and imaginative education imbues this book with a sense of hope and creativity (and with whom Gulla worked extensively), suggests that, "A metaphor not only involves a reorientation of consciousness, it also enables us to cross divides, to make connections between ourselves and others, and to look through other eyes" (p. 391). Dark times call for powerful metaphors. The authors use this book to maintain such connections between themselves, their practice, and teachers and students everywhere; to that end, they employ the central metaphor of "upside-down" to describe the turn

that life took when COVID-19 hit in early 2020, in a range of productive ways throughout the book. Put another way, the expression "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade" may offer another metaphor for the artistry and hope offered here by the co-authors. Two master New York City educators who have a long-standing collaboration in arts and creativity education, and who use that grounding to retain hope for themselves and their students throughout the worst days of the pandemic in New York, and the worldwide economic and political contractions that have accompanied it. But this is a timeless text, based on vibrant traditions, that will have resonance long after the current troubles have passed.

The authors critically address the Common Core and its limitations, offering their own brand of "inquiry-based learning through the arts in the hopes that with enough commitment and imagination, even teachers who are so constrained can find the cracks through which they might be able to slip some creativity." Grounded in their expert knowledge and ethic of shared inquiry, hope blooms amid pandemic alienation, standardized testing, narrow curricula and racist and xenophobic national agendas. This book offers a heartful lifeline to teachers and students (and their families) from immigrant, intercultural, inner city, lower socioeconomic, and refugee backgrounds, and other collaborators and learners from vulnerable communities including youth of color, LGBTIQ+ youth, and those for whom formal educational experiences are challenging, demoralizing, or simply untenable.

The book includes examples of lessons and student creative work from both their high school classrooms and graduate level teaching methods courses. Weaving these practical tools with Greene's aesthetic education philosophy offers pedagogical strategies with extensive potential application, including multiple disciplines in higher education and professional development in a range of contexts. As they remind us throughout, "An inquiry-based learning approach is designed to work for virtually any age or learning style, because it draws upon a person's prior knowledge and their curiosity." And that is just one of the important contributions from this book: a kind of arts-based, applied aesthetics that is transferrable yet particular to each unique environment. This is artistry and creative teaching and learning at its best. At a time when teachers and scholars across the globe are grappling with confusion and overwhelm about operationalizing the mandate to "teach creativity" in their diverse fields of enquiry, this book not only tells, but shows us how.

Importantly, the authors tell us that "Teachers need to be able to understand how to engage with their own creativity before they are able to teach their students how to do so. Teacher education and professional development rarely address creativity or imagination in any way," and indeed this is the central purpose I had in mind in setting up this series. While teacher education and professional development in creativity are growing, it still often focuses on skills-building and assessment, rather than mindset shifts or teachers' own experiences of creativity. It's a joy to be able to offer readers a volume that is so directly focused on teacher education and creativity in classrooms, and never more timely than during COVID-19. Their personal backgrounds are a testament to the power of being raised with appreciation and practical experience of creativity in the home. In my own research, these early experiences certainly go a long way toward putting teachers at ease or discomfort in approaching the expectation that they nurture creativity in their students.

These co-authors have taken their childhood experiences into adulthood, and their many students over the years are its beneficiaries—as now their readers will be. The book remains grounded deeply in practical and passionate classroom experience, and this depth and respect for their student-collaborators comes through vividly. This, as much as any of the more formal strategies and exemplars, is responsible for the rich teachings you will take away from this book. Lastly, these authors tell us—but also show us throughout the book—how powerfully their long collaboration is "rooted in a shared enthusiasm for exploring the possibilities of imagination and creativity in teaching and learning, as well as an understanding of the importance of helping students develop their voices in order to achieve full participation in a functioning democracy," the kinds of creative-relational (Wyatt 2018) commitments we need now, more than ever.

It is with enormous excitement and pleasure that I welcome this important text from Amanda Gulla and Molly Sherman into my series *Creativity, Education and the Arts* (Harris 2016). The book and their bodies of work (together and separately) exemplify a desperately needed inquiry-based approach to arts-, creative- and democratic-education. Maxine Greene's aesthetic education is the beating heart of this text. Her shining example of the ways in which philosophy can inform everyday and

political pedagogical activism are kept faithfully and dynamically alive in this text by Gulla and Sherman, and we're so very grateful to them for it.

Anne M. Harris

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…and of course Molly Sherman, whose enthusiasm, brilliance, and stamina make all of this work possible!

—Amanda Nicole Gulla

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—Molly Hamilton Sherman

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction and Looking Both Ways: How (and Why) a High School English Teacher and an English Education Professor Formed a Partnership That Informed Their Practices

Introduction

In this book, we would like to provide a theoretical and practical guide to understanding and implementing an inquiry-based approach to teaching and learning centered on creative responses to works of art. According to Maxine Greene (Fig. 1.1):

> Aesthetic education is an approach to teaching and learning that teaches what it means to pay heed to the appearances of things, the sounds of things, to be responsive to new vistas and new forms. It is–deliberately and delicately–to move students to fresh insight and awareness.

I (Amanda) had been teaching aesthetic education courses as part of the English Education program under the guidance of teaching artists from Lincoln Center Institute for the Arts in Education while Maxine Greene was their Philosopher-in-Residence. Over time, my practice emphasized the inquiry and art making aspects of the aesthetic education process and as it evolved, I began calling my classes inquiry-based learning through the arts because the name more accurately reflected the direction of my teaching practice. I was fortunate enough to be able to discuss this change

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Fig. 1.1 Word cloud 1

of course name with Maxine Greene, who expressed her approval because it matched the classroom practice that it described. Philosophy in practice has to evolve to meet the moment, so this renaming reflects a practice that is deeply influenced by aesthetic education and emphasizes the hands-on inquiry pedagogy that is an essential element of that philosophy.

Our work juxtaposes strategies for teaching at the secondary school level with pedagogy designed for higher education or professional development. An inquiry-based learning approach is designed to work for virtually any age or learning style, because it draws upon a person's prior knowledge and their curiosity. Inquiry in the classroom involves carefully organized steps that include observation, questioning, hands-on artmaking, and then deepening the learning through further questioning and analysis. This process in itself is transformative, teaching learners to look and respond to the world in new ways. Because we are simultaneously thinking about teaching adolescents and teaching their teachers, our goal is to guide teacher candidates in the kinds of learning experiences we want them to curate for their own students. As teacher educators, our focus is on having candidates engage in a range of experiences themselves and then reflect on their work in ways that will support them in adapting these experiences for their own classrooms. Because this book is based on the experiences gained through a collaboration between a high school

teacher and an education professor, we bring to this project the experience of our co-teaching and how it influenced our practices with teacher candidates and with adolescent students.

A Word About Word Clouds

The word clouds that begin each chapter started out as a tool that we were using at the completion of each chapter draft to allow us to see where our emphasis was when it came down to the actual words we were setting down on the page. This is a very useful tool, particularly in a collaborative text when two or more people are collaborating on a text, and want to make sure that their voices are well harmonized. The word cloud is computer generated—you just copy and paste your text into a box and the word cloud generator calculates the number of appearances made by each word and places them in order of importance by size and proximity to the center. We were delighted to see that the word "students" appears prominently at the center of most of our word clouds. The word clouds mirror what we are writing. It occurred to us that it would be useful for readers to have a quick glimpse of key words we would be discussing at the beginning of each chapter. There are a number of different word cloud generators that you can experiment with. We have used Wordcloud.com (https://www.wordclouds.com/), which offers free and open access to their product. Their website carries this statement:

> The word cloud images you create are yours to use any way you see fit. Feel free however to give credit to Wordclouds.com and spread the word! You are even allowed to use the generated word clouds commercially.

The word cloud made with Molly's students in Chapter 2 was generated using a different site, WordItOut (https://worditout.com/) which graciously gave us their permission.

Creating an Immersive Pedagogy for Students and Teacher Candidates

Teachers need to be able to understand how to engage with their own creativity before they are able to teach their students how to do so. Teacher education and professional development rarely address creativity

or imagination in any way. If they are mentioned at all, it is with an expectation that teachers will build creative experiences for students into their curriculum, without any regard for whether the teachers have had such experiences themselves. In our graduate and undergraduate methodology courses, we have observed that many teacher candidates lacked experience and confidence engaging with works of art and creative expression. In this book, we discuss the need for educators at all levels to engage with creative work and provide examples of how we have designed methodology courses for teacher candidates that allow them to engage in creative work while simultaneously reflecting on those experiences. We will discuss the role of the imagination in inquiry-based learning, the importance of placing the arts at the center of the curriculum, and the reciprocal relationship between theory and practice as we also provide practical models for how one might actually bring this work into both secondary and higher education classrooms.

The technique of immersing teacher candidates in experiential learning is designed not only to teach classroom strategies, but to foster in teacher candidates the visceral experience of learning through the active use of creativity and imagination. All of this depends upon the ability for students to make personal connections with works of art and through that shared understanding, connect their personal stories with history and world events. As one English Education graduate student said:

> This class allowed me to be vulnerable without even realizing it. Sharing in class was something that always gave me anxiety. However, in this class it was always so easy and effortless. I knew we were all there to grow and speak our truth and this, as a result made me comfortable about being uncomfortable.

That experience of being "comfortable about being uncomfortable" allowed this student to innately understand the rewards of taking creative and intellectual risks in the classroom, and the essential role of community in supporting risk-taking. Establishing a supportive community of learners became a central part of her teaching practice. Having a teacher who is willing to take risks as a writer and as a learner will benefit many students going forward.

We will also illustrate throughout the book how inquiry-based learning engages students' curiosity and makes them more active participants in their own education as it builds literacy skills, classroom community, and

self-confidence. This book attempts to make the practices of teachers and teacher educators visible to each other. Too often, teachers are expected to coach students in types of writing with which they themselves are not familiar. Teachers who are not educated to integrate creativity into academic learning tend to avoid such engagement in the development of their curriculum, thus perpetuating schooling that is devoid of art and imagination. This book is designed to demystify the process of creative inquiry for teachers by providing examples of the philosophy of aesthetic education as it is enacted through the practice of inquiry-based learning through the arts. We provide concrete examples of art-based lessons for the English classroom that have been successful in helping secondary students develop literacy skills and become more engaged in their schooling, while our teacher education courses are aimed at providing candidates with immersive experiences that will help guide them in creating such learning opportunities for their own students.

The techniques in this book were developed as an informal collaboration between an English teacher at an international high school in the Bronx, (Molly Sherman) and a professor of English Education at Lehman College, the Bronx campus of the City University of New York (Amanda Gulla). Each of us in our own way has strained at the limitations of expectations in defining our respective roles. Having each been raised in an environment that nurtured creativity, we understood how various forms of writing—not just the school essay, but poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction—could help to enhance comprehension and the ability to make connections between ideas. We understood how sometimes creative exploration using non-word-based art forms can offer opportunities for students who struggle as readers and writers to engage with complex ideas. Such experiences foster a kind of conceptual literacy, giving students practice in tackling sophisticated ideas which they can interact with more confidently when they encounter those ideas in more complex texts. For the students at Bronx International High School with whom we began this collaboration, literary elements such as metaphor, point of view, setting, mood, and tone were abstractions until they were asked to apply them to visual images. All of these elements were explored in a single day's discussion of Frida Kahlo's painting *Self Portrait on the Borderline Between Mexico and the United States.*

While the Common Core Standards have largely limited what is required of students in the English Language Arts classroom to writing arguments and explanatory texts, our experiences both as teachers and as

learners had taught us that the opportunity to experiment with a variety of genres strengthened engagement, efficacy, and skill.

Our collaboration is rooted in a shared enthusiasm for exploring the possibilities of imagination and creativity in teaching and learning, as well as an understanding of the importance of helping students develop their voices in order to achieve full participation in a functioning democracy.

This book is structured as a dialogue between a teacher and a teacher educator in order to highlight the need for learning spaces for teachers at all stages of their careers, where they can experiment with approaches to pedagogy by first trying them out on themselves, then in their classrooms, and then returning to the learning space in order to reflect on their practices. In order to frame the possibilities of such creative collaborations between educators, we give the reader a little bit of our own backgrounds and the work we were doing individually before we began working together. We will begin with stories about our respective backgrounds and the various influences that led each of us to believe in creativity and immersion in the arts as an essential part of education at all levels. In some places (like these first two chapters) where the goal is to focus on how our individual experiences inform our collaboration, we have written separate parts. In other parts of the book where the focus is primarily on texts and teaching strategies, our voices will be blended and/or intermingled.

Amanda Gulla: Live Your Life Like an Artist

It was never a question for me whether the opportunity to experience and make art was necessary. I grew up in a home full of books and paintings. My first word was "book." Also, I began speaking in full sentences at nine months old (and, according to family legend, once I started, I never stopped). My mother Enid was a voracious reader who, while she never really considered herself a "writer," wrote poems and the most fabulous letters full of personality and clever wordplay. From her example, I learned the power of language to express and connect. Language—spoken and written—was her art form and naturally became mine too.

My father Salvatore was an artist who taught art to middle school students in the South Bronx for 32 years. Although he became a teacher around the time I was born and this was an essential part of the way I thought of him well into my adulthood, I later realized that his teaching role was an interlude in his life as an artist. He had been born in that

same neighborhood in which he later taught, into a working-class Italian-American family. Becoming a teacher was a way for him as an artist to provide a stable, middle-class lifestyle for his family.

He was a prolific painter, sculptor, potter, and jewelry maker, but my childhood memories are filled with Saturday classes in dance and drama at the South Bronx Community Action Theater, the organization he founded to bring the arts to children in the neighborhood in which he was born and which was now the poorest congressional district in the United States. He believed in the arts as a formative educational experience the way many others believe in team sports. He was a great proponent of the power of making things. From the ages of 8–10, I took Saturday classes at the Action Theater, studying African dance with a Nigerian choreographer and Flamenco dance with members of a Roma dance troupe from Spain. I learned to throw pots on a potter's wheel and blend colors in a graphic design studio. Through these experiences, I caught glimpses of other cultures and got to explore a variety of art forms. I also got to see how the shared endeavor of rehearsing for a dance performance or a play could bring together children from disparate backgrounds and become a means of building community. My parents also sent me to a summer camp with strong art and theater programs. It was these early experiences that led me to become involved in theater in high school and then choose that as my major in college. I loved working with an ensemble to create imaginary worlds on stage. I had planned to pursue a career in theater, but instead found a place for my love of theater, poetry, and fiction in my own middle school English classroom, and then eventually coordinating the English Education program at Lehman College. Wherever I taught, it felt absolutely essential to build community through shared creative experiences.

My father once told me that I could be an artist in the way I chose to live my life. I took that literally—studying theater and music in college and taking painting and drawing classes at the Art Students League. All of these experiences are part of who I am, but writing has always been my home, and poetry has always been the heart of that home. This is how I understood my father's advice—that all aspects of life—work, relationships, making a home—have the potential for creative expression.

I thought about my own education in kindergarten through high school. School for the most part seemed to me to be a mechanism by which to prepare children for a daily grind of dull routines. But there were occasional moments of inspiration—the trip to the museum, the

science experiment, opportunities to write poems and stories. There were never enough experiences like these, but they were transformative when they did occur.

As an elementary and middle school teacher, I tried to create as many opportunities as I could for students to write, draw, paint, and sing as part of their learning process. Now that I am an English Education professor, I often shape methods classes around the study of a painting, or a song, or a dance, or a photographic image, imagining secondary English Language Arts classes as not just about reading the adolescent canon of *Catcher in the Rye* and *Romeo and Juliet*, but as spaces in which students have opportunities to find and shape their individual voice.

In graduate school, I encountered the work of Maxine Greene, an existentialist philosopher, is an essential voice in the field of aesthetic education. Building upon John Dewey's writings about aesthetic encounters (1934), she encouraged us to reconsider the possibilities of public education. Greene encouraged us to "imagine things as if they could be otherwise" (2001, p. 98). Such acts of imagination should not be taken for granted. One of the challenges of integrating the arts into so-called academic subjects is that students sometimes resist because they have no reference point for valuing the products of their own imagination in this context, and many have had little exposure to the arts outside of popular culture. According to the New York City Department of Education, a student graduating from high school is required to earn a total of 44 credits. Only two of those credits are in the arts. Out of a total of nine standardized tests required for graduation, none involve the study of any art form (https://www.schools.nyc.gov/learning/in-our-classrooms/graduation-requirement).

Perhaps public school systems in the US tend not to treat the arts as essential because they, like most bureaucracies, prefer the measurable and the predictable to the creative and the imaginative. Since the 1980s, the American education system has devoted increasing resources to measuring competencies through standardized testing and accountability measures (Ravitch 2010, p. xxii). The value of education in a democracy has been oversimplified to what the Common Core Standards calls "college and career readiness" (http://www.corestandards.org/). Nowhere in these standards is there any indication that the qualities of curiosity, creativity, or collaboration are valued. The beliefs reflected in these standards are a continuation of what Maxine Greene called "the preoccupation with 'competencies' and behavioral objectives" (1980, p. 318). Because school

administrators tend to be so preoccupied with the quantifiable, learning experiences full of "adventurousness linked to aesthetic encounters" may be considered "subversive of the ends of schooling" (p. 318).

Prolonged inquiry around works of art can lead students to consider who they are in relation to their communities, and to name and interpret the times in which they are living. This is especially true when we ask them to respond with their own creativity. Works of art have the power to show us parts of ourselves that we might never have been able to name before. Just ask anyone who has ever had a song on repeat, or seen the same movie a dozen times, or stands transfixed in front of a painting. There is a rich opportunity in asking students to articulate that spark of connection between themselves and a work of art. Sometimes we may recognize some aspects of our own experience in a work of art. An immigrant might see a familiar reflection of her own ambivalence in Frida Kahlo's *Self Portrait on the Borderline Between Mexico and the United States*. Describing that painting can help the student articulate aspects of her own story in new and more powerful ways. This is one way in which we can help them to find and develop their voices. Voice, as Romano (2004) describes, is "the writer's presence on the page" (p. 5). Of course, any kind of writing can help students develop voice, but what we have discovered through our work is that writing in response to works of art helps students articulate ideas that are beyond their own experience, and that in fact represent a connection between their lives and the wider world.

Molly Sherman: Placed in Worlds of Which I Had Never Conceived

I grew up surrounded by words. Words in books, words issued from actors' mouths on stage, the words that flew, clacking, from the portable Smith-Corona my father hauled around when crafting words for TV shows, movies, or *The Portable Circus*, a touring comedy troupe. My father was both a writer and a director and in my early years, I grew up thinking of all theater spaces as my father's office. Cross-legged on a hard wooden seat, my favorite days were those when I arrived near the end of rehearsal. From the stage, actors emoted and embodied times and places that were far removed from the math workbooks and cursive writing of my young world. I watched bare-bones sets and leg-warmer garbed actors turn into denizens of fantastical worlds far richer than what I lived in my