

Teaching Creatively and Teaching for Creativity

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This article provides a brief review of generally accepted ideas about creativity, followed by examples of music teachers teaching creatively and teaching their students to be more creative. Implications for teacher education and policy recommendations for music education are discussed

Keywords: creativity, music education, teacher education

I approach this article as a teacher educator, composer, performer, college professor, and former band director for grades 5–12. My focus is related to both teaching creatively and teaching for creativity in terms of music teacher preparation.

The teacher education goal is simple: we want to produce good teachers for the future. So what is a good teacher? We know that a good teacher must combine musical artistry with the artistry of teaching. We emphasize both these goals in the college music education degree as students work on teaching skills and performing skills. However, the glue that holds those two ideas together is the concept of creativity. The creative teacher can inspire, motivate, and develop students that can function at various levels of engagement in the multiple roles that musicians have, including performer, listener, critic, composer, director, conductor, improviser, and producer.

Creativity is a nebulous concept, and it takes some thought and study to discover how it might function in the music education world. It is helpful to think about what we already know about creativity, the creative process, and creators. A number of ideas are in circulation about creativity, all discussed by multiple authors:

- There is a difference between *Big C* and *little c* creativity. Big C creators are those composers that are icons in our study of music. Musicians trying to be creative tend to be intimidated by the inevitable comparisons with Beethoven, Stravinsky, or Bach. However, if we focus on *little c*, or “ordinary” creativity, it is possible to envision being creative. Most people can be creative in some way every day: a new spice in an old recipe, a flower ar-

rangement, a new analogy in teaching legato phrasing, a new interpretation of a familiar piece of music, a melody containing a chord progression or interval that somehow seems fresh and new.

- A constellation of personality traits is associated with creative individuals. Some of those include the willingness to take risks, a tolerance for ambiguity, an intrinsic motivation, a sense of humor, a wide range of interests, and persistence.
- Creativity takes time. Although we may have flashes of insight, it takes time to work out the implications and uses of that insight.
- It is possible to structure education or work so that they include opportunities, motivations, and rewards for creative activity. Amabile describes creativity in the workplace as a “function of three components: expertise, creative-thinking skills, and motivation. Can managers influence these components? The answer is an emphatic yes—for better or for worse—through workplace practices and conditions” (1998, 78). Creativity happens when expertise, creative thinking skills, and motivation overlap.
- It is possible to encourage people to be more creative and to approach tasks with creative outcomes in mind. The idea of teaching someone to be creative can strike people as an impossible task, which is a realistic response if we imply that we can teach someone to become another Beethoven or Einstein. However, we can teach people to approach their jobs or their study with creativity in mind. We can teach and model techniques for generating ideas, for being sensitive to personality traits that might encourage creative expression and risk-taking in their work. We can help people allocate time to creative activity. We know that “incubation” is a part of the creative process. We can structure teaching and creative situations so that the student will understand to the value of letting an idea simmer.

We know how to design college curricula to encourage creativity, at least in a limited way. Some creative activities in which undergraduate music education students may participate include:

- theory class composition exercises;
- jazz band and jazz choir with the use of improvisation;
- instrumentation and arranging;
- improvisation classes; and
- composition classes.

These ideas are a good start, but a commitment to encouraging creativity in all students throughout the degree is sometimes missing. We tend to focus on composers and jazz performers in this regard, and after a few experiences, we often leave the rest of the students to fend for themselves.

As professors, we can model creativity through our own performing, composing, conducting, and writing. But having professors that are creative does not necessarily influence students to be creative themselves.

In music education curricula, it is important for students to have opportunities to reconnect with the joy of creative activity in music. One of the few opportunities is the elementary methods class. Students in elementary methods can connect (or reconnect) with their musically creative selves in learning to teach in a process-oriented way, such as the Orff approach. For example, students can take a familiar poem and add body percussion, speech sounds, and instruments to create a musical composition. The goal is the students' exploration of the creative process, not necessarily a public performance of the piece. I teach secondary methods and work with students to prepare them to teach ensembles. We are often so focused on the issues related to being an effective high school band, choir, or orchestra conductor, that it is easy to ignore creativity. But I see students experience tremendous growth in the elementary methods class. This set of experiences has the potential to be one of the most influential creative activities for all preservice teachers.

Here is the real point: ensemble directors focus on teaching students to be the *same*. We want the same vowel sound from singers, the same step style in marching band, the same tone quality from the brass. These are worthy goals when concentrating on producing an artistic and well-crafted performance. Approaching teaching with creativity in mind, however, forces us to think how students are *different* from one another.

Creativity is an attitude that we must develop in preservice teachers. The goal is to develop orientations and techniques for approaching situations in new ways, not just the way used by the student's high school director. How can we explain dotted quarter and eighth notes in new ways? What can we do to surprise our spring concert audience? How can we be more effective in talking about the way the cellos bow a passage?

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Teaching creatively at any level can keep us interested in our teaching and keep the attention of our students. We devise new ways to accomplish the same goals, but we also leave room for unplanned and unpredictable goals to develop.

Think of all the ways that you have heard *staccato* described—for example, popcorn popping or walking barefoot on hot pavement. It is easy, although sometimes appropriate, to overuse an effective analogy, but when your students know what you are going to say before you say it, it is time to think creatively. For this process to happen, a structure must exist that helps us use our expertise, motivates us toward some reward, and helps us think about the tools for creativity. Amabile's three-part model is applicable to teaching as well as business:

1. *Expertise*. In music education, a certain set of skills must be in place to flourish as a teacher, such as musicality, pedagogical skills, people skills, planning, assessment, and classroom management.
2. *Motivation*. Amabile describes ways that a business (or a school or a university) can kill creativity. We have all probably worked in situations in which new ideas were not encouraged. Support for creativity from school administrators or a colleague is helpful, but much motivation is intrinsic.
3. *Creative thinking skills*. We know about the personality traits and processes that are present in creative individuals and we can therefore learn how to be more creative. For instance, the knowledge that many creative people have the ability to generate lots of ideas can lead a person to develop that skill. We have to give ourselves permission to generate ideas—to brainstorm. Many ideas will be inappropriate, foolish, or not useful, but practicing being a divergent thinker can help a person become more creative.

Teaching others to become more creative is a step that many teachers do not take. As one example, many teachers are content with a reasonably good teaching situation that produces groups that show some musical achievement. But it is possible to teach in a way that not only produces good achievement, but also teaches students to be more creative. This should be the next goal for teacher education policy as well as for teaching in the field.

For example, imagine a middle-level band with thirty students, in which instrumentation is not balanced because of a lack of trumpets and too many percussionists. The director cannot find music that fits the ensemble, so she brainstorms several ideas to address the situation:

1. Use music in the folder. Rewrite parts so that other instruments cover the trumpet part. Add other percussion parts so that everyone keeps busy.
2. Compose or arrange new music that fits the ensemble
3. Switch some of the percussionists to trumpet.
4. Investigate other kinds of ensemble solutions, such as turning the group into a Caribbean themed band where everyone plays different instruments such as steel drums, guitars, and junk percussion.
5. Look for a new job.

This list shows a teacher exploring multiple solutions to an educational problem; in effect, she is “teaching creatively.” She has motivation (increased musical satisfaction, better student achievement), expertise in music education, and knowledge about her own creative process.

At the college level, can we teach preservice teachers to consider multiple solutions to educational problems such as this middle school band? Of course! That is what classroom work, practicum experiences, and student teaching are all about. This scenario can be used as a case study in a college methods class. The next step, however, is to consider how the situation can be used to teach *for* creativity.

To encourage creativity in her students, the music teacher must get them involved in solving the problem.

1. Outline the problem to the students. This may take some time. Do the students know that their band is not balanced? Do they understand issues of sonority, blend, melody, harmony, school performance expectations, and literature?
2. Help students generate some ideas of what can be done to fix the problem.
3. Help students with their solutions. If the solution is to write some new music, then they will need some skills with notation. Could they generate a new piece of music “by ear?” A well-structured adventure in writing music could be infinitely motivating. Could students produce a totally unexpected idea, such as interacting with another band via new Internet technologies?
4. Solve the problem using student-generated solutions. The students need to develop the expertise, motivation, and creative thinking skills necessary, and the function of the teacher is to facilitate this process.

Sternberg argues for a three-facet model of creativity (1988, 125–47), in which intellect, intellectual style and personality are integrated in a creative person. Creative people can recognize and understand problems, and represent them in a way that stimulates action. They are curious, tolerant of ambiguity, willing to surmount obstacles, willing to grow, intrinsically motivated, and willing to take moderate risks, and they have a desire and the ability to work for recognition. This may describe creative people, but it also sounds like a description of the best teachers I have had! The connection between

creativity and teaching is natural, but we must not neglect the guiding principle of nurturing current and future teachers with the ability to think creatively and teach for creativity.

Kratus (2007, 42–48) has described music education as at a tipping point. What will music education be like in twenty years, when most of us are long gone from the profession? New teachers must deal with curriculum issues, scheduling, policy, artistry, and imagination, as well as dozens of other issues in a rapidly changing environment. Over three or four decades, creativity will be more of an expectation than ever before. I do not think that expansion is necessary—I believe that these responsibilities are enough.

The following policy recommendations will help improve creativity in music education.

- Encourage teachers at all levels to teach creatively and teach for creativity in their students. Train teachers and motivate and reward them appropriately for good teaching that fosters creativity. My theory is that if you teach for creativity, make it a habitual activity, and encourage and reward it, then your students will be more creative.
- Resist the notion that standardized tests will answer all our problems in education. The beauty of the arts is that more than one answer can be correct. An education that is based on content, artistry, and creativity will ensure a rich future for the arts in public education.
- Work on creativity in various aspects of college music education, so that all music education majors (not just jazz performers) have the tools to be the creative teachers of the future. Students need expertise in music and teaching; the motivation to develop new and exciting curricula, methods, and approaches; and a clear understanding of the creative process, partly based on regular practice. The new teacher needs to be able to articulate to many constituencies why creativity matters, and how the arts are uniquely positioned to encourage creative thinking.

If we give preservice teachers the tools for dealing with the future, then we ensure the health of the profession. If we only teach woodwind fingering and marching band techniques, then we are approaching a negative tipping point, with the possibility of a precipitous change in K–12 music education. This result is not good for students, the field of music, or our culture at large. Higher education has both policy and teaching roles. There is no time to lose in making creativity a part of everything we do.

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