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Developing Mental Content Through Creative Activities

By Martha Barrett Newell

Sara Teasdale¹ in her little poem, "Barter," says that life has loveliness to sell, and we must give all we have for one white singing hour to remember. One moment of this hour is exemplified in ". . . children's faces looking up holding wonder like a cup."

It is this wonder that is the magic upon which the adult contributors of childhood education can build. It is this wonder which is so easily overlooked by adults in their over-stimulated emphasis on theory and standards of excellence.

Despite the unfortunate fact that grown-ups seem to lose their "Magic Shoes" of creativeness, children seem to hold tenaciously to them and it is in these shoes that a child can be allowed to put to use his creative spirit. When this spirit is at work, not only the child's mind and body are at work in the most delicious manner, but here also the language art is functioning at a fantastically high degree.

The classroom, unfortunately, is the chief offender in not correlating these two facets: the open wonder and awe which a child brings to any experience and secondly, the innate ability to produce individual, *creative* activities.

Each of us seeks the approval of our peers, and this is a natural desire of children, too. But, as adults we seem to have forgotten the warmth of response to the fact that "I made it myself." There is magic in creation, and a very special kind of magic to the child who senses that he is indeed part of what he produces. Everything, from the molded handprint of the earnest kindergartener (Do you not still have one of these pieces of loveliness . . .?) to the finished mural of the high school student, has in it a part of the person who formed it. One of the most satisfying moments to a child is the knowledge that here "is a piece of *me!*"

That there can be a definite carry-over into other areas of learning using the creative spirit is seen in the following example of classroom activity. This will prove to be definitely early elementary activity. Do

¹ Sara Teasdale, *Love Songs* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1917), p. 20.

not let this discourage the ideals of creative expression being carried over into all grade levels.

One of the greatest challenges to the first grade teacher is the method of teaching reading. Here a child will develop a vocabulary which he will take with him the rest of his life. It is this foundation which is so necessary and it is in this early stage of learning that the child is the most perceptive and retentive.

Most reading programs offered by schools today fall into a staid, set, stereotyped pattern. Too often the *Teacher's Guide* does all the work and the teacher lets the valuable process of learning by creating go out the window. "Let the art or music teacher use the creative mode" is the by-word of many elementary reading teachers. Yet the use of such can produce results far beyond the everyday, grouped reading approach.

Lack of training in the creative arts does not need to be a hindrance. A teacher merely has to recall the imagination she must have had in her childhood and use it daily. She does not need special training either in art or music. (Although it is seldom that an elementary teacher has not been at least exposed to these.) The record player, several recordings of the picturesque type of music and an area where the children may have room for freedom of movement are all a teacher needs above the normal classroom facilities.

A good example of picturesque music is Ferde Grofe's "Grand Canyon Suite." This has been used to great effect with children. The initial activity should be postponed until the end of several weeks of school. It is necessary that the teacher be well acquainted with her group in order to know just how to begin this project. It must be noted here that this is not just a one day exercise, but a continuous process and can replace or supplement the prescribed reading program of the school. It has been used successfully in either case. It would be well to discuss this approach with the school system's reading consultant or the school principal in order to eliminate future misunderstandings.

There are many ways to begin this program. It is up to the teacher to take into consideration her abilities in relation to her group's potentials.

When introducing the music, do not give any hint as to the composer's intent in writing it. Do not rush the ground work laid in preparing the children for listening. The way these first moments of motivation are handled will set the stage for the whole program. Now is the time to build on the wonderful imaginations of children. Tell

them that they are going to hear some magic music which will take them to faraway places, or will tell them exciting stories of many people. The music will tell them to do something, too. A tremendous suspenseful moment comes when the teacher finally turns on the record player and the music begins.

Let the children listen to several minutes of the music and then ask them to show what the music told them to do. This can be either through dance, art or song. It is suggested that the first time this is done the children use the art form as this allows for more originality. The children should be scattered around the room, not sitting in rows. This will allow for freedom of expression in any of the modes suggested. While the class is producing what the music told them to do, the music could be replayed. Then comes a "Show and Tell Time." This will prove interesting and the teacher must be alert to trends set by the class.

In *Children and Music* Beatrice Landeck² says, "Nevertheless, however intricate the pattern of learning or teaching may be, it must, if it is to be effective, have an underlying design and a purposeful continuity. Unless there is an underlying purpose and design in experimentation, what follows cannot be properly called growth. A child needs a vast number of experiences and a vast amount of material for his play before he can discover a fact or truth. Once he has discovered it, however, it is the responsibility of the adult guiding him to articulate the principle and to offer him other opportunities for applying his newly gained knowledge."

Too many adults allow children to have plenty of play activity without bringing them to a definite educational climax. The creativity is dissipated and it becomes meaningless. Experience, the course of knowledge and understanding, is wasted. It must be remembered that the fun of an experience is not lost when the teacher begins to relate these acts of imagination to impersonal fact and theory. The child will welcome this intrusion because it pertains to his own interest and activity. Building on these experiences with new ones is, after all, the framework of learning.

After each child is given the opportunity to express his thoughts, actions or art depictions, the class then is led to analyze the total

² Beatrice Landeck, *Children and Music* (New York: William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1952), p. 234.

result. There will be a close relationship between several of these works and from these can be created an original story. This story now becomes class property and each child is encouraged to let his ideas be a part of the whole.

The story is first only verbal. It can be worked over several times during a week's time. The end result need not be hurried. When the story is polished by the class and all seem satisfied with it, then is the time to put it down on an experience chart. The teacher and class can work together in putting it on the chart. Whenever there is a word which will seem too difficult for the class, a picture may be drawn by a member of the class and substituted, *but the word itself should be placed beside the picture.*

The next step is for the teacher to duplicate these charts with a mimeograph or ditto process machine. The story should be in manuscript letters, written as the class has dictated and produced so that each child will be able to read it. This entails extra work on the part of the teacher, but the end results are well worth this effort. Each day or so a new page or chapter is added to the story, until the class now has an original reading book all its own.

There are many supplemental materials and creative projects that might be used to further the experience of the class. Plays may be written depicting the story. A puppet show presented to another class is great fun.

All forms of language arts have been brought to use in this method of reading. It is a fresh approach, using music, art, literature, dramatics, and, above all, originality.

Carroll Pratt³ said in a lecture delivered in the Whittall Pavilion, The Library of Congress, "All art is thought of as involving some kind or degree of emotion either through direct arousal or through indirect representation. In this regard music is often assigned first place. 'Music stands quite alone,' said Schopenhauer in his penetrating treatise on art. 'It is cut off from all the other arts. It does not express a particular and definite joy, sorrow, anguish, delight, or mood of peace, but joy, sorrow, anguish, delight, peace of mind *themselves*, in the abstract, in their essential nature, without accessories, and therefore without

³ Carroll C. Pratt, *Music as the Language of Emotion* (Washington, D. C.: The Library of Congress, U. S. Printing Office, 1952), p. 5.

their customary motives. Yet it enables us to grasp and share them in their full quintessence.”

The joy of creation, of producing original things, is what motivates the children in this activity. The work may be crude or beautiful, but the spontaneity of producing is delightful.⁴ “The spirit of attack and enthusiasm has carried over and shows its results in other forms of study.”

Children, from infancy, are real experimentalists in language. Why not continue it into formal schooling? Is it necessary to fence them in with unnatural, set rules in order to acquire adult forms of communication? It is necessary in the classroom to create a “language environment” through these stories which closely correlates with the musical activity of doing what the music said to do in order to build a pattern for mature speech and reading.

The use of dramatics is a necessary part of any elementary classroom. It develops a natural, spontaneous situation in which the child may lose his self-consciousness. Dramatics is part of the growing up process of children and is a natural thing to allow in the school.

Education must learn to use the natural impulses of children to best advantage. The usage of these, however, must be guided and channelled by understanding and appreciative teachers. Teachers ought not forget to look for the loveliness of wonder in a child as he creates, as he is *allowed* to create, as he is *encouraged* to create.

To relate this to mental content, then, is to quote from Carter and McGinnis.⁵ “The obtaining of meaning from symbols, or reading, depends upon *sensation*, which is physical, and upon *mental content*, which is psychological. These two factors should be understood by the individual who is interested in the process of reading. Reading is a communicative skill and is closely related to speaking, writing and listening. It is a function of the whole organism and is carried on for a definite purpose.” Reading must become a part of a child’s total existence. It must be a *natural* part of everyday experience. What better way than through creativity when the child has used all his

⁴ Gertrude Hartman and Ann Shumaker, *Creative Expression* (Milwaukee: E. M. Hale and Company, 1939), p. 26.

⁵ Homer L. J. Carter and Dorothy J. McGinnis, *Learning to Read* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1953), p. 10.

faculties to develop an original experience in creating the story and he has had the total involvement of his body through rhythm, sight, sound, touch and the satisfying fact that he is a *part* of the completed work.

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