Why is it important to develop learners’ creativity in the 21st century?

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Short Bio: Dr. Helen Charman is the Director of Learning and National Programmes at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. A creative and cultural learning professional for over 25 years, her specialism is design education in museums. Her professional portfolio encompasses schools, universities, galleries, museums, festival organizations, local authorities and charities. She was a founder member of the education team that mobilized the new Design Museum, London team at Tate Modern (2000) and on the directorate of charities. She was a founder member of the education team at Tate Modern (2000) and on the directorate of charities.

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Opposite my desk at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London hangs a bossy bright blue poster by graphic designer Anthony Burrill, framed by a sunny, dandelion yellow wall. It is in my direct line of sight and I glance at it countless times a day. When I have meetings (and I have many, many meetings) I always sit facing it. It comprises three simple words: Ask More Questions. This is my work mantra. Why? Because curiosity is at the heart of creativity. This is the first proposition I make here in my argument for the vital and intrinsic need to develop students’ creativity today. Creativity starts with curiosity.

Why is curiosity important? Curiosity is essential if we are to understand the world, understand ourselves, and understand others. All three are vital components of growing up and learning how to navigate the world, ourselves and others. Curiosity is what motivates us to explore the world – the world of ideas, the imagined and the real. Curiosity opens up the space of imagination, of ‘what if?’ and ‘how might we?’ questions. Imagination fosters a space of possibility and potential, a space to play with ideas, and with things.

This leads me to my second proposition about creativity. Creativity is fostered through play. What may seem like a tautology bears further consideration: play is how we try ideas on for size, how we test and experiment with ‘what might be’; how we make connections between ideas, people and things; play is how we learn. Learning through play is especially – in fact, exponentially – impactful in our earliest years when the infant brain is at its most plastic and receptive. But this plasticity continues across the life course and is an essential neurological and psychological factor for our ability to adapt to change – an ability never more needed by young people than in today’s fast-moving world, where uncertainty abounds.

So we have three propositions concerning creativity. Creativity is sparked by curiosity and imagination. Creativity develops through playing and experimenting with ideas and things. Creativity is a driver for change and for adaptability. Loosely federated, these three propositions add up to a designerly approach to thinking and acting in and on the world for positive change.

The development of this ability to act in and on the world – let’s call it creative agency – is vital for every young person’s education today, because the world which they inhabit and will inherit is faster-moving, and more complex and uncertain, than perhaps at any time before. It’s a world of unfolding possibility and potential, which demands thinking afresh about the skills and aptitudes required such that young people can rise to, and embrace, the manifold challenges and opportunities.

The question of what these skills and aptitudes are is one that much occupies our thinking as museum learning professionals in today’s complex world. At the V&A we are engaged in a process of reinventing museum learning for the 21st century by harnessing the potential of design and creativity to build creative agency and confidence amongst future generations. Our capital project to transform the Museum of Childhood from a museum of the social and material history of childhood, to a creative and design-led incubator for children and families, tackles this head on. In this endeavor, the work of thought leaders and experts from global education to neuroscience and developmental psychology is instrumental. We are exploring the broadest contexts for museum learning as we draw on the work of creative practitioners in art, design and performance, the three fields that comprise the V&A’s collection. Object-based experiential learning is a powerful source of inspiration for students by directly engaging with material expressions of the ‘made’ world, they develop their own creative agency and gain insight into its potential as a force for change.

Design in particular is a force for positive change and this is why we focus educational activity on creative, design-led approaches to teaching and learning. Design constantly innovates to meet changing needs. These needs are manifest at the level of the individual and community, from local to global, from object-based to service-led. We live in a fast-changing world leading to an uncertain future, generating new types of needs and challenges, with starting rapidity. Designers learning – a creative cycle that encompasses divergent and convergent thinking across imagination, experimentation and creative problem solving within the constraints of a design brief – can help equip young people to meet the needs and address the challenges of this fast-changing world, with creative confidence anew.

That the world is undergoing rapid change is not news – but it is still newsworthy. A rubric of oft-rehearsed factors influencing the speed of change encompasses what is described as the ‘fourth industrial revolution’ or ‘Revolution 4.0’ – meaning, the fusion of the physical, technological, and biological worlds. Students need to be rewindowed creatively to navigate this world – which calls to mind design theorist Alexander’s ‘design thinking,’ Ginsberg’s beautiful and provocative photographic work ‘Designing for the Sixth Extinction’ (2013). It’s a compelling example of the power of divergent thinking – meaning the act of imagination and its creative articulation – to explore and create a space of potential and possibility, a space of how the world might be. In this instance, Ginsberg’s beautiful world in which synthetic biology tackles the challenge of endangered species and climate pollutants wrought by the Anthropocene in an area of climate change.

Climate change is the most significant of impacts that is reshaping our world. But see also: a rapidly ageing population, Austerity Brexit (for the UK), Trump America, Artificial Intelligence, Antibiotic resistant pathologies. The future of work… there is a multitude of challenges needed by young people than in today’s fast-moving world, where uncertainty abounds.

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Anthony Burrill

This leads me to my third proposition: creativity as a driving force both for affecting positive change and for adapting to change. When a creative act happens, the world is not the same as it was before. Creativity affects change. And change happens when it is fired by an act of the imagination, which then becomes materially manifest and expressed in the world through language and behaviour.

Ask More Questions

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and though it has ever been so, in the 21st century it is happening faster than ever. As this is the world that young people inhabit and will inherit, it is one in which they will need creative agency to navigate and shape its complexities. It’s either that – or be shaped by the world. Act – or be acted upon.

“...creativity has an intrinsic and invaluable role in the education of future generations in today’s uncertain world.”

I have argued here that creativity has an intrinsic and invaluable role in the education of future generations in today’s uncertain world. It is the students of today who will shape the world in the future. But the risk is that creativity will be crowded out by curricula that prioritize ‘know what’ over ‘know how’. And so I applaud the LEGO Foundation for its commitment to promoting the value of creativity for students today. This mission has been the core endeavor of learning at the V&A since our inception as the South Kensington Museum in 1852.

Today the V&A continues to inspire the next generation of creatives, innovators, designers and entrepreneurs who will shape the future, reaching 400,000 learners annually onsite, nationally and online. Onsite the museum is daily thronged with young people exploring creativity and innovation through direct engagement with material culture of the ‘made’ world from architecture to virtual reality. Nationally, our Design Lab Nation project establishes creative ecologies between schools, local creative industry and museums with V&A Collection objects on loan to partner galleries in five UK cities. Each city – Blackburn, Coventry, Sheffield, Stoke and Sunderland – has a rich industrial heritage in which the projects are embedded. Online we reach tens of thousands of students with resources, which position the museum as a digital sourcebook for creativity. We work with a further 400,000 visitors a year at the Museum of Childhood.

That the PISA innovative domain assessment for 2021 focuses on creativity is testament to a global understanding of its critical value for students today. Yet despite this, creative subjects in England are fighting for their place in schools. Henry Cole, as inaugural director of the V&A, made a clarion call for the power and importance of the museum as a powerhouse for creativity and design; the V&A was to be ‘a school room for everyone’. 150 years on, this exhortation is more vital and relevant than ever. To return to the bossy blue poster in my office, the question to ask now is not why creativity is important for the lives of students in the 21st century, but rather, how creativity can be embedded in every young person’s education, everywhere, in a fast-changing world.