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Limitless: Reshaping the Future of the World through Art

2022 Gaitskell Address by Dr. Mary Blatherwick



Mary Blatherwick

Mary Blatherwick teaches visual art and creative education in the undergraduate and graduate programs at the University of New Brunswick. Her research interests include, creativity, visual culture, intercultural understanding, and community-based arts education. She has received numerous awards for her teaching, resource development, production of documentary films on NB visual artists and leadership in the fields of art education and creativity. She also co-edited the book titled *Creative Dimensions of Teaching and Learning in the 21st Century*. Mary is the chair of the Atlantic Centre for Creativity and a founding member of the Canadian Network for Imagination and Creativity.

Educators can play a key role in enabling their students to gain a deeper understanding of the arts and the role they can play in reshaping the global community. Through sharing our stories and appreciating those of others essential insights can take place that influence the nature of human existence.

The arts are now a major force in informing, sharing stories, making connections and enriching lives of individuals and communities across the globe. Maxime Greene (1977) points out that "...the artist strives for coherence, clarity, enlargement, intensity" (p. 201). With the latest immersive technologies and AI artists' stories and perspectives are now even more pervasive and impactful. She also notes that the arts cannot change the world, but they may change human beings, who might change the world. It is through the influence the arts have on individuals and communities therefore that the future of the world could be reshaped.

This address touches on various aspects of individual and collective creativity, and the roles they play through the arts (in particular the visual arts) in connecting us on a local and now global level.

I will attempt to answer the following questions:

- 1) *What is creativity and how is its capacity increased through the arts?*
- 2) *How have new technologies expanded the artist's ability to express and share individual and communal identities, ideas and issues?*
- 3) *How do art educators empower their students to share their stories in a changing world?*

Question 1) What is creativity and how is its capacity increased through the arts?

Creativity has been defined in many ways depending on the context or subject being considered. Ken Robinson (2001) a world-renowned advocate for creativity defines it as "imaginative processes with outcomes that are original and of value" (p. 118). He sees it as a capacity that should be nurtured in every child in order to reach his/her full potential in life.

John Dewey (1916) philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer suggests the imagination, as the basis of creativity, plays a huge part in shaping an individual's world and it should therefore be nurtured in all humans as we each have creative potential. He emphasizes that at an early age we imagine, create, and share stories so cultivating creativity should be a major goal of public education. Keith Sawyer (2006) musician, educator, and scholar offers another definition of creativity. He sees it as a capacity not only related to individuals but as something that happens when people create collectively.

"Through sharing our stories and appreciating those of others essential insights can take place that influence the nature of human existence."

To illustrate Sawyer's point I would like to share this story about collective creativity. A number of years ago a Canadian radio program featured a story about the creativity of remote communities in Newfoundland and Labrador. Many had fallen on hard times after the collapse of the fishing industry. Several families boarded up their houses and moved away. Those that remained struggled to find ways to maintain a sense of purpose, identity, and well-being. By connecting creatively, and pooling their artistic resources they developed the concept of 'Community Concerts'. These concerts were community gatherings in which its members would share stories, recite poems, and write and perform plays, often featuring local characters and events of historical significance. The connectivity, levity, and well-being resulting from these performances brought the members of the communities closer and increased their appreciation of each others' creative capacities.

These events also increased their understanding of shared human experiences and challenges they faced, often on a daily basis. Through collective creativity, they were able to interact with one another, share personal stories and feel part of their community on a deeper and more empathetic level.

This is true of the Newfoundland and Labrador Community Concerts and many other events where people come together to experience the power of the arts as a means of sharing lived experiences, reinforcing identities, and instilling a sense of well-being. This story therefore is not unique as this happens when the collective energies of a group of people connect through creative activities resulting in greater understanding, acceptance, empathy, and belonging.

Humans have the capacity to face adversity and hard times through a willingness to take 'creative risks' for the well-being of their community. It is this spirit and ability we must not lose sight of in facing the uncertainties of the future. Regardless of what resources we might have on hand;

our creative capacities to imagine, generate new ideas, tell our stories and find innovative solutions to the challenges we face empower us to transform and reshape local and global communities.

Increasing Creative Capacity through the Arts

Creative capacity relates to our ability to imagine, discover, invent, innovate, and express thoughts, feelings, and ideas. It was once said that without the creative capacity of the human race to generate new ideas and solve problems we still would be living in caves. The importance of developing our creative capacities, therefore, is fundamental to our growth and development as a species.

There are five modes of communication: numbers, letters, sound, movement, and image. In teaching about creative capacity, I have found that when these modes intersect and/or overlap a wide array of creative possibilities emerge. As educators, we can provide opportunities for our students to explore traditional art-making processes but also encourage them to combine different modes of communication and new technologies in order to create art that expresses multiple perspectives and worldviews. Ken Robinson writes tirelessly about the need to increase our creative capacities as he considers them to be as important as learning to read and write. Peter Gamwell & Jane Daly (2018), and other like-minded educators also advocate for imagination, creativity, and the arts becoming central to educational experiences, so all young people grow up with self-confidence in their creative and artistic abilities.

It should be noted that using our imaginations, having original ideas, and finding creative solutions are skills not only encouraged through the arts, but are common in other fields of study as well. Often 'creatives' from different disciplines collaborate on art projects or find innovative solutions to real-world problems. Opportunities to develop one's creative capacity therefore should be

available for students of all ages in order to develop their creative confidence and instill a mindset that embraces curiosity, collaboration, and innovation.

Creativity in the Conceptual Age

Daniel Pink (2006) in his book *A Whole New Mind*, argues that creativity needs to be more widely accepted because we have entered a new era in our evolution - one in which creativity in all its forms has become crucial for our future survival and well-being. He states that "We are moving from an economy and a society built on the logical, linear, computerlike capacities of the information age to an economy and society built on inventive, empathic, big-picture capabilities to what's rising in its place, the conceptual age or the age of art and heart" (p.2). It is an age animated by a different form of thinking and a new creative approach to life, one that values aptitudes that Pink refers to as high concept and high touch.

High concept involves the capacity to see patterns and opportunities, create art, write a narrative, and combine ideas. He states that high touch on the other hand refers to "the ability to empathize with others, to understand the subtleties of human interaction, to find joy in oneself and to elicit it in others, and to stretch beyond the quotidian in pursuit of purpose and meaning" (p.3). High touch attributes are comprised of six essential abilities which are needed "to make our way across the emerging landscape, and into the future" (p. 4).

The six abilities are: Design, Story, Symphony, Empathy, Play, and Meaning:

1) Design – This helps to give meaning to many aspects of our lives. It enables us to shape our world.

2) Story – It is crucial to learn to write and tell a compelling story.

3) Symphony – Today we need to synthesize information, and combine skills, not just analyze information.

4) Empathy – Humans need meaningful relationships and to care for each other.

5) Play – We benefit from laughter, lightheartedness, games, and humor because they help our general well-being and a sense of belonging.

6) Meaning – It is important to find purpose and fulfillment in our lives.

In the Arts, we cultivate these abilities, but Pink argues that it is now increasingly critical for other fields of study to stress the development of these abilities as well.

The Arts

The arts have always reflected the culture in which they exist and therefore they are a powerful form of communication that captures the essence, nuances, and stories of lived experiences. In Peter O' Connor & Viv Aitken's (2014) paper titled "Being Awake in the World" they offer the following thoughts by Craft (2000) on children's experience in the arts. He states that before a child begins school the arts are a central means for exploration and coming to know the world. Young children spontaneously dance, build imagined worlds, take delight in color, shapes, and texture, and play with sound and rhythm. Young children's play is always improvisatory and intuitive, always integrative, and always intrinsically motivated. These traits lay a foundation for future engagement in expressing personal ideas and stories through the arts. Some educators also suggest that children's play can be the precursor to abstract thought as the young child learns to create and manipulate symbolic forms of expression, and to find meaning in the expressive work of others.

As Sir Kenneth Robinson (2015) points out the arts are not something children need to be taught to do, but are rather something which children feel driven to do. He argues that the arts allow children to make sense of their world while also providing an escape from it.

He argues that the arts, when nurtured not only in childhood but throughout our lives, have the ability to 'reshape', 'reform', and 'transform' how we individually and collectively see and experience the world. By sharing our stories and experiences through the arts we can engage with others on a global level. Several educators including Paolo Freire and Peter McLaren (2000) also consider the arts as a means for empowering individuals and communities to represent, question, challenge, and remake their own realities.

Three of the roles of visual art:

Child Art - A child's thoughts, feelings, and reactions to their world can be portrayed through visual images.

Cultural Meaning - Art can depict aspects of lived experiences.

Social Commentary - Art can address powerful issues.

Question 2) How have new technologies expanded artists' abilities to express and share individual and communal identities, ideas, and issues?


There are many forms of art being created and shared in today's high-tech world, not only enabling individuals but also communities from across the world to connect through social media and sophisticated emerging technologies. Sharing visual art on this massive scale greatly increases the level of awareness, empathy, and understanding of diverse cultural, social, and political perspectives. We are learning from each other's art and gaining insights into lived experiences like never before. The arts are enabling us to appreciate, question, empathize and open our eyes to new possibilities, perspectives, and challenges, not only faced in our own lives but in those of others. Collapsing boundaries between media, exploring immersive arts, and seeing art forms that represent shifting demographics are a few of the emerging trends. New venues for exhibiting art are more commonplace

and traditional art galleries are having to rethink their uses and audiences. The arts are becoming more diverse, controversial, and experimental, reflecting a world that is changing. In the past visual artists sent their work to distant galleries, leaving it to hang for people to view. But with the rise of new technologies, they are developing new strategies for visually interacting with their audiences, including inviting spectators to become artists themselves through the use of new interactive technologies such as virtual and augmented reality. These new experiences in virtual reality are creating a major change, in much the same way smartphones have transformed how we communicate on a global level. New forms of interactive media arts, therefore, have the potential to influence and reshape communities worldwide.

Question 3) How do art educators empower their students to share their stories in a changing world?

Educational research and practices in the arts are reflecting shifting interests, issues, and purposes, not only on a local but also a global level. Art education now encompasses topics such as decolonization, gender issues, discrimination, social activism, accessibility, diversity, environmentalism, well-being, creativity, play, intersectionality, and embodiment. The work of art educators, therefore, involves teaching art-making skills as well as raising students' levels of awareness of issues and challenges being faced by the human race.

Art educators understand that images are now the most powerful and pervasive form of communication and so with social media and advances in technologies such as immersive and interactive arts, digital, and AI there now are limitless ways to share visual content, form new connections, and start conversations across the globe. With multiple visual art-making options now available to the public, everyone can tell stories visually, thus creating greater awareness and appreciation of diverse cultures and their communities.



"Sharing visual art on this massive scale greatly increases the level of awareness, empathy, and understanding of diverse cultural, social, and political perspectives."



Arts education not only takes place in schools, colleges, and universities, but in communities like those in Newfoundland where art provides a means of connecting with others in meaningful and often profound ways. As art educators we can expand where art-making takes place by encouraging students to engage with members of their communities in order to become part of its collective creative energy. Experiencing creativity at a community level provides a strong basis for future involvement in the arts as a powerful form of expression and connection.

Keith Sawyer (2006) points out that social media represents a communal social process in which millions of people are collectively creating things, suggesting things, and starting movements. He sees that much of creativity is social and collective. People connecting with their communities and others across the world, Sawyer argues, is key to keeping pace with a changing world. By encouraging our students to be curious, imaginative, and creative, as well as to think critically about challenging issues we help them find their 'voice' and passions. Through encouraging them to share their stories we empower them to make meaningful connections with their communities and potentially with others on a global level. Art educators, with their art expertise and understanding of creative capacity, can empower their students to take risks, make meaningful art, and build more creative, collaborative, and empathetic communities worldwide.

We now have the ability to connect, and share our stories locally and across the globe in new and diverse ways. As arts educators we embrace creativity in its many forms and provide students with a wide range of artistic opportunities, enabling them to share their stories and ideas to ultimately find their place in a changing global community.

CONCLUSION

The arts embrace creative essentials and coupled with new emerging technologies they

have expanded their influence, allowing for more individual and communal stories to be told, and new ideas to be shared. Through the creative and transformative power of the arts we can become better informed, empathetic, and compassionate, thus enabling us to help reshape and transform the future of the world.

The possibilities are now limitless!

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