

187 Creative Lives: A Qualitative Study of Students' Creative Biographies

Jane Jensen

University of Kentucky, Lexington, USA

Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

Creativity is often included as a buzzword of 21st century curricular goals alongside innovation and entrepreneurship. How do we teach it? How do students perceive it? This presentation shares the results of a phenomenological study exploring college students' creative life stories. How do they define creativity, the arts, and their own aesthetics relative to their past experiences, current field of study/major, and future plans? The research design included modified biographic narrative interviews with 25 undergraduates. This research provides insights on the ways that personal arts and creativity narratives inform students' understanding of critical thinking, personal freedoms, and their membership (or not) in creative communities. Implications include a discussion of the democratic potential of the explicit inclusion of creativity in the curriculum.

Full paper

Creativity is often included as a buzzword of 21st century curricular goals alongside innovation and entrepreneurship. Tied to notions of critical thinking and problem-based learning, creativity is used as a pedagogic tool, an assessment criteria, and occasionally a strategy for engagement in curricular and co-curricular programming. Most of us are familiar with creativity workshop activities including solving problems with rubber bands and pipe cleaners. Other assignments that celebrate creativity are found in the humanities and the arts proper: writing creative non-fiction, telling a digital story, mapping an imaginary terrain, and other flights of fancy to push students to think "outside the box". What kinds of aesthetic literacy and experiences do the students bring to these activities?

What is the connection between creativity in the life course, the collegiate curriculum, and student development? This presentation shares the results of a phenomenological study exploring students' creative life stories. How do they define creativity, the arts, and their own aesthetics relative to their past experiences, current field of study/major, and future plans? The goal of the project was to focus on students' life experiences with arts and creativity to explore what kinds of aesthetic literacies and personal conceptions of creativity students bring to their collegiate experience.

The context for this study is an American public research university in a small city that draws students from the six state area of the greater Ohio River Valley region. The university is considered less selective with a large first generation college student population. Typical of universities in the United States, students are required to complete thirty credit hours (approximately two years of study) of general education coursework including, in this case, an unusual requirement of a course in "arts and creativity". All students who completed their "arts and creativity" course in person, on campus following the pandemic lock down (AY 21-22) received a survey invitation to participate in the study. 215 students completed the survey which included demographic information, details of their academic major, type of general education course they had chosen, as well as their contact details. Of these, 25 were purposefully recruited to achieve a diversity of gender, major field of study, and type of general education experience. They were then invited to participate in a zoom interview of approximately an hour following a modified biographic narrative interview protocol.

The first and only instruction for the first half of the interview was: "Tell me your arts and creativity story; start whenever you'd like and discuss any aspect of your story you'd like to tell." Once the student had finished their initial narrative, the interviewer would probe to elicit more details about particular parts of the story. The interview would then turn to college; and, the student would be asked, "Tell me about your Arts and Creativity college story; what A&C class did you take and what did you do?" Again, the student would tell their story and the interviewer would ask clarifying stories. Because the college course discussed in the second half of the interview was contextualized by the

students' life story covered in the first half, the students would often compare and contrast their course experience with their arts and creativity history. The interview data were transcribed and analyzed using the constant comparative approach of thematic analysis.

As an anthropologist who studies post-secondary credentialing and student success with an undergraduate degree in art history and studio art, this project is personally interesting. I brought to my reading and re-reading of the data my knowledge of college student development, post-secondary curriculum, and art education. The students described rich histories of participation in both fine arts and informal creative practices throughout their lives; yet, they often separated these rich narratives of personal creativity from their academic lives as college students. They described their previous creative practice as freeing; a space where they could be "authentic". They also described collaborations in their creative work; times that arts and creativity gave them a sense of belonging. Yet, again, sometimes this freedom and sense of community was shut down when they reached college because they could not or were not able to continue to participate. Their experiences with purpose-built arts and creativity courses in college were mixed. This research provides insights on the ways that personal arts and creativity narratives inform students' understanding of critical thinking, personal freedoms, and their membership (or not) in creative communities. Implications include a discussion of the democratic potential of the explicit inclusion of creativity in the curriculum.

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