THE NATURE OF CREATIVITY: 
AN EXAMINATION OF THE CREATIVE PROCESS 

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THE NATURE OF CREATIVITY:
AN EXAMINATION OF THE CREATIVE PROCESS

A Project

by

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Abstract

of

THE NATURE OF CREATIVITY:
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by

Jennifer Helene Ray

This project is an Alternative Culminating Experience for a Master of Arts in Education: Curriculum and Instruction with an Elective Emphasis on Arts in Education. It follows Pathway 1: Artist as Educator. The author of this project examined her own creative processes in order to gain insights and understandings about the factors that affect creative pursuits. What is the nature of creativity? What motivates the creative process? Why do creative blocks occur? Many factors in today’s society get in the way of people’s inherent need to be creative or express their creative ideas. This project informed the author about such factors and helped to improve her productivity as an artist and her effectiveness as an art teacher. Narrative inquiry was conducted. Information about the process was recorded and analyzed through the use of artistic and reflective journaling. A body of literature was reviewed in the area of creativity, inspiration and process in relation to creating art. Readings related to Arts Education were also reviewed. Artistic work was done in a home
Several ceramic pieces were produced and shown in a group art show. For the future, the author intends for this project to serve herself, her students, and her community by better engaging these groups in inspired art production and therefore greater individual fulfillment. This project is significant to anyone looking to find their own passion or looking to engage students in creative pursuits.

_______________________, Committee Chair
Lorie Hammond, Ph.D.

_______________________
Date
DEDICATION

To Len and Marian Ray for their love and support.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication .................................................................................................................... vi

List of Figures .............................................................................................................. ix

Chapter

1. OVERVIEW ........................................................................................................... 1

   Problem or Challenge of Project ................................................................. 1

   Importance of Project ........................................................................... 1

   Significance of Project ........................................................................ 2

   Project Context ..................................................................................... 2

   Project Procedures ............................................................................. 2

   Reading for Project ....................................................................... 3

   Research Methods ............................................................................ 4

   Implications for Teaching ................................................................. 4

   Limitations ......................................................................................... 4

   Definition of Terms ........................................................................... 5

2. LITERATURE REVIEW ....................................................................................... 7

   The Arts in Education: Theories and Practices ........................................ 7

   Perspectives on Creativity ................................................................. 17

   Calling on Creativity ........................................................................ 23
3. NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE CREATIVE PROCESS .................................. 31
   Personal History ............................................................................................. 31
   Culminating Experience ................................................................................. 58
4. REFLECTION ...................................................................................................... 59
   My Personal Growth as an Artist ................................................................. 59
   Knowledge and Skills Gained in the Arts ...................................................... 61
   Application of This Work as an Art Teacher ............................................... 62
   My Personal Journey and Projections for Future Work ............................... 65
   Importance of This Work Within the Field of Art Education ....................... 65
References ............................................................................................................ 67
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td><em>Balance</em>, Clay and Glazes, Piece #1</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td><em>Chair</em>, Clay and Glazes, Piece #3</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td><em>Boat on Water</em>, Clay and Glazes</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1

OVERVIEW

Problem or Challenge of Project

The author examined her own creative processes in order to gain insights and understandings into the factors that affect creative pursuits. Questions that were considered during this process that helped inform the experience were: What motivates the process of creation? Why do creative blocks occur? How does one work through those creative blocks? The author examined her attitudes about creating art, and worked through creative blocks to produce a body of work that is meaningful to her.

Importance of Project

The arts have been an integral part of human societies across the globe for thousands of years. Humanity, as a whole, benefits from the individual’s creative pursuits in numerous ways. The individual brings new ideas to the arts, which enable people to see the world and the human condition in a new way. The arts bring truth, meaning and fulfillment to the individual. Yet, many individuals do not take the time to engage in creative pursuits. Many factors in today’s society get in the way of this creativity. The author examined her creative processes and discovered some of the factors that prove to block creativity. Navigation around or through these blocks helped the author to reach a new level of fulfillment in life and gain an understanding of what motivates or inspires the creative processes. Insight was gained into the comparative quality of life when the author’s creative needs were fulfilled and when
they were not. Insights into her own creative process helped to inform her of human creativity in general, and will guide her in the future as a teacher and inform her when working to inspire creativity in her future students. This process exposed the nature of inspiration and creativity and will serve to inform the author as a teacher of the necessary components for an effective art program.

Significance of Project

This project is important to the author as an individual and as an art teacher. It speaks to those who are looking to be engaged in their own creative pursuits, or engage their students in creative pursuits. Through this process the author has become a more inspired artist and teacher. A teacher who is inspired can have a greater impact on his/her student achievement in the classroom. This project will inform the author’s teaching and help to guide her actions to build a more effective art program that engages all students in meaningful art experiences.

Project Context

The author worked alone for the majority of the art production, reading and reflection. Discussions and critiques in small groups with other artists from the cohort were used to process ideas related to journal writing, literature reviews, art processes and artwork. Art production took place in a home studio. The culmination of this project was an art show with other artists from the cohort.

Project Procedures

The author explored and examined her creative processes and gathered information through reading over the course of 10 months. She used a daily journal to
reflect on the creative process, gather and record inspirational visual imagery, and process ideas related to relevant topics for this project. Weekly production of art and reflection on that process was practiced. Prompts from *The Artist’s Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity* (Cameron, 1992) helped to guide some of the journaling process and provided inspiration to create artworks. Critical to this project was the exploration of processes that help facilitate creativity and identification of the nature of creativity and inspiration. Both of these things helped the author to produce a body of artwork. Photo documentation was used for reflection and recording of artistic processes. The author participated in small group discussions and critiques in order to get feedback and explore ideas. The author participated in a group art show with members of the cohort as the culminating experience for this project. The author displayed several ceramic pieces for public viewing at a group show at the “Vox” Gallery in Sacramento. Reflection on the process of preparing for a show and participation in the show helped inform this project as well.

**Reading for Project**

The overarching question that guided the reading for this project was: Why do some people engage in creative processes while others do not? Topics to do with creativity, inspiration, and process, in relation to creating art, were explored through reading. Insights gained in the area of creativity, creative blocks and how to get around creative blocks were important to the process of this project. Three areas of literature were reviewed for this project. Those areas are as follows: theory and
practices of arts in education, theories on creativity, and processes for becoming more artistically productive.

Research Methods

Narrative research through journaling was used to process ideas, record time spent on art production, compare variables surrounding production process, reflect on creative process, gather inspirational visual imagery, practice original compositions, and make connections between reading and personal experiences. Goals of this research were to make connections between variables that lead to creative production or non-production, identify motivators or inspiration, examine processes that lead to optimal creative production.

Implications for Teaching

The author is better able to serve her community and students as a result of this study. This project also provided necessary components for her, as an artist, to recover creativity and become more productive. Results from this project will impact the structure of her future art program. Educators can positively impact their communities by helping to form the citizens that make up the community, and society as a whole. These citizens are their students. This project helped to inform the author of ways to inspire her own art production and subsequently will help her to inspire her students and bring this informed perspective to the classroom through curriculum and practices.

Limitations

Some of the limitations for this project were as follows: money for materials, limited availability of different medium and materials, time while teaching and
studying to create art, availability of specific classes for enrollment, space to create art in general and varied art forms specifically, the exploration of only the area of visual arts in relation to creativity.

Definition of Terms

Coiling, coil building: Age old method of constructing hollow forms by rolling and attaching ropes of soft clay.

Creativity: The ability to use the imagination to develop new and original ideas or things, especially in an artistic context.

Engage: To involve somebody in an activity, or become involved or take part in an activity.

Experience: Active involvement in an activity or exposure to events or people over a period of time, leading to an increase in knowledge and skill. The knowledge of and skill in something gained through being involved in it or exposed to it over a period of time. Direct personal awareness of or contact with a particular thing. Knowledge acquired through the senses rather than through abstract reasoning.

Human Potential: The belief that through the development of "human potential", humans can experience an exceptional quality of life filled with happiness, creativity, and fulfillment.

Inspiration: Something that stimulates the human mind to creative thought or to the making of art. The quality of being stimulated to creative thought or activity, or the manifestation of this.
Motivation: A feeling of interest or enthusiasm that makes somebody want to do something, or something that causes such a feeling. A reason for doing something or behaving in some way. The biological, emotional, cognitive, or social forces that activate and direct behavior.

Narcissism: Excessive interest in one’s own appearance, comfort, importance, abilities, etc.

Pinching: moving and shaping clay with the fingers.

Sgraffito: A design scratched through one surface to another.

Slab: Flat piece of clay from which shapes can be fabricated.
Chapter 2
LITERATURE REVIEW
The Arts in Education: Theories and Practices

Curricula and Learning

The subject of what should be taught in the American school system is one that has been addressed by philosophers, psychologists, politicians, and teachers alike. It is a subject worth exploration and debate especially when one considers that what and how we teach our children, the future citizens and leaders of our nation, will affect the direction of society for years to come. It is from this perspective that the readings selected for this review were considered.

The readings referenced in this review helped to frame the author’s Culminating Experience in respect to Arts Education. Curriculum and the subject of what knowledge should be taught in the schools have been fought over since the 19th century. Herbert Kliebard (1982) examined these issues and identified the major groups that vied for control of curriculum in the schools. Although there were many individuals and groups lobbying for their causes, four major groups had the most impact on education at the time: the Humanists, the Child Study Movement, the Social Educators, and the Social Meliorists. The Humanists wanted curricula in the schools that taught the power of reason, sensitivity to beauty, and moral character. The Child Study Movement was a data based educational philosophy that touted curricula that is measurable and centered around the natural order of child development. The Social Efficiency Educators grew out of a perceived lack in the school systems. Much of their
curriculum was based on an industry model of efficiency and standardization. The Social Meliorists believed that education could impact social change, and through equitable teaching, create a just society.

When considering the aims of the four major groups that Kleibard (1982) identified in the arena of education in the 20th century, one can identify strengths in each that could be combined to support a valuable curriculum. The optimistic ideals of the Humanist perspective with respect to human capacity, and the subjects of the “humanities” would be an asset to any curricula. Considering the developmental stages of students, much as the Child Study Movement considered good practice, is a practical consideration when teaching any child. Checks and balances among subjects taught in the classroom should be recognized as good practice in schools, but not a driving factor for curriculum development. Standardization, as the Social Efficiency Educators lobbied, can lead to curricula that is mechanical and rote when used in extreme, however could be used as a basic measurement, given it is used as informative and not summative.

The basic premise that the Social Meliorists considered for curricula, that is the aim of schools to impact change towards a just and democratic society (Kliebard, 1982), could be a good aim for education. Considering this, the question “What kind of society do we want to live in?” becomes pertinent. If educational institutions consider this question when developing the aims of curriculum and school environments, then schools become the tools to shape the future citizens of our nation. A curriculum that aims to promote a democratic society would look quite different
from the theories and practices in place in American schools today. In order to maintain or achieve the aim of a just and democratic society, the educational systems need to teach and value multiple forms of literacy, promote critical thinking, allow for access to a reciprocal relationship with culture, create opportunities for decision making and questioning, and give students access to fulfillment.

*Visual Literacy and Learning*

If a democratic society is to be achieved or maintained, it is important that the citizens be versed in visual literacy in order to understand and decipher meaning conveyed through visual forms. All forms of literacy need to be addressed in curriculum. If students are to successfully navigate through the visual world that surrounds them, schools will not be able to fully educate them if visual literacy, such as the arts, are not valued or given time in the classroom. Students need to be able to deal with the constant and increasing amounts of visual imagery in the world that surrounds them. Elliot Eisner (1998) addressed this topic in his writings. He identified the need for multiple forms of literacy in the classroom so that curriculum can provide experiences for students to gain meaning and knowledge through various forms of representation. Schools should provide opportunities for experiences through which these literacies can be accessed. Curriculum that does not address all forms of literacy limits the meanings that students are able to access, and serves to hinder their ability to have a reciprocal relationship with the culture and environment that surrounds them. Eisner discussed the need for schools to address these forms of literacy in order to teach the whole child:
Humans are makers of meaning, and the forms that culture contains have been invented to convey meanings that could not be conveyed in any other way. If we are concerned with cultivating in the young a broad capacity to construct meaning, we must provide in our schools the opportunities they need in order to learn how to do so. (p. 19)

The visual and performing arts allow for experiences with the senses. Through these experiences one becomes adept at expressing and understanding the various forms of literacy that are utilized, or can be utilized to convey meaning. Without such sensory experiences, one does not have access to all the nuances and understanding of the many forms of literacy in the surrounding environment or world. Eisner (1998) discusses the qualitative nature of the world. He makes the distinction between receiving and “achieving” an experience. According to Eisner a person reads subtle cues, and learns to distinguish and differentiate the information in the qualitative world around him or her (pp. 23-24) in order to make meaning. He stated:

Making such distinctions, noticing, becoming perceptive, depends on sensory differentiation. Our first avenue to consciousness, the refinement of sensibilities, ought to be a prime aim of education. It is through cultivated and refined sensibility that patterns in nature and culture are distinguished. From these patterns works of science and art are built. (p.24)

A curriculum that excludes the arts does not serve to cultivate this type of development of the senses.
Experience and Learning

The mind is something that needs to be developed and cultivated. The aim of schools should be to cultivate the whole mind, not just the parts which can be scientifically measured. A curriculum that engages the senses and creates a celebratory attitude towards learning can aid in this cultivation. The aesthetic experience can bring joy and pleasure to curriculum and engage students while creating attitudes towards learning that might inspire more learning and construction of meaning.

Schools need to recognize their responsibility in imparting knowledge to students in a meaningful way that makes connections and promotes retention. John Dewey (1934) wrote about having an esthetic experience through art. His work is of interest in relation to educational practices, when one looks at the particulars that he discussed in regards to having an experience being a link to gaining meaning or knowledge. He defined the esthetic as a sensory experience with enough tension or opposition to offer opportunities for students to problem solve their way to equilibrium and, thus, to have an esthetic experience and gain meaning. An esthetic experience is full of movement and change, and the individual involved in this drama, in order to have an authentic experience, should respond to these changes with reflection and move towards growth or reconstruction (Dewey, p. 13). One cannot remember what one has not experienced; the ability to remember is influenced by the quality of an experience. Dewey wrote that an experience comes out of that meaningful exchange with nature “contrast of lack and fullness, of struggle and achievement, of adjustment after consummated irregularity, form the drama in which
action, feeling and meaning are one” (p. 15). This theoretical claim can be applied to the classroom in order to give students access to knowledge in meaningful ways.

Curriculum that creates meaningful experiences in the classroom can engage students. If content is to be learned, students first need to be engaged. Educators can create curriculum that engages the senses, promotes problem-solving attitudes, and creates meaningful experiences in the classroom. Dewey (1934) addressed the arts as an avenue to this type of experience. He pointed to the thinking involved in the artistic process when he said, “the artist has his problems and thinks as he works” (p. 14). The arts are open-ended and allow for the individual to problem-solve as they experience artistic expression and creation. Curriculum that addresses this type of thinking would promote democracy, in the classroom, by allowing students to see the connections between cause and effect and prepare them for the ever-changing world around them.

The anesthetic experience, according to Dewey (1934), is one where there is unconscious living, an imbalance between “doing and undergoing.” There is a tendency to drift, bouncing off one thing to another, with no attention paid to the connections, often rushing around too busy and distracted, or aloof and passionless, with no beginning or end (pp. 45-46). A teacher-centered classroom, where the students passively receive information with no opportunities to construct meaning and connect with materials is one empty of the esthetic experience.
Art and its impact on culture make it an important part of any curriculum. It should be considered the duty of schools to give students modes of understanding to interpret the culture around them. As well, students should be afforded opportunities to contribute in their own unique way to the culture around them. Eisner (1998) addressed this ideal in his statement:

In democratic societies and in those societies seeking to create a democratic way of life, children are helped to realize their distinctive talents and through such realization to be in a position to contribute to the culture as a whole. The presence of multiple forms of representation in the school is a way to try to achieve that democratic ambition. (p. 52)

This statement is aligned with the views of another educational philosopher, Howard Gardner (1983). Gardner proposed the concept of multiple intelligences. He redefined intelligence by arguing that in the human mind are multiple modes of learning and expressing meaning. He used the word “intelligence” quite purposefully, as he recognized the systematic valuing of primarily reading, writing and arithmetic. A curriculum that leaves out any of the forms that allow students to externalize what is internal in them is not “just” and does not serve a democratic society. Educational systems should not work to measure all children by the same standard, but instead should allow them to contribute in whatever unique way they can. Suzanne Langer (1971) identified the contributions of art to culture in her writing. She claimed:
Art is the epitome of human life, the truest record of insight and feeling, and that the strongest military or economic society without art is poor in comparison with the most primitive tribe of savage painters, dancers, or idol carvers. (p. 86)

The arts are invaluable to society. They communicate ideals, thoughts, and beliefs. The connections between art and culture should be highlighted by school curricula in order to further democratic ideals where all people are valued as individuals.

*Inquiry and Learning*

If a society is to maintain or achieve democracy, the citizens of that society need to be prepared to make informed decisions, and to ask questions. School curricula should aim to prepare students to function in a democratic society. From voting to personal life choices, a democratic society is based on the rights and privileges held by the people and the choices that they make. The freedoms made possible by a democratic society require that the people of that society are able to make choices that further promote freedom and other shared values, such as equality.

A curriculum that includes the arts is one that allows students to practice making choices and asking questions. The very act of creating involves making personal choices. The practice of perceiving art allows for thoughtful questioning and inquiry. For example, an educational system that offers students choices in electives is one that shows the students the values of a democratic society, by allowing them to make a choice for their studies. Nel Noddings (1999) addressed the topic of choices in
education and how that promotes a democratic society. “What rightly concerns us is the maintenance of a form of government under which our right to make choices is held sacred” (p. 580).

The practice of asking socially relevant questions should be present in the classroom. The knowledge gained by questioning is more valuable than information learned by rote memorization. A student that is given opportunities to reflect on questioning and go about constructing an answer gains the disposition of learning to learn, rather than of having the right answer. Donald Arnstine (1967) wrote, “given our understanding of the learning process, a child simply could not learn to learn in a classroom in which arbitrary restraints were placed on his freedom of thought, of decision, or of social interaction” (p. 39). It is the duty of the schools to create situations for the students that allow for questioning and choice making.

Authentic Experience and Learning

A further aim of education should be to show students the way to the good life. Dewey (1934) identified the arts as a path to this type of living. Educators would be wise to consider teaching children the practice of living in the present by creating artistic opportunities to experience the esthetic. As Dewey wrote:

Only when the past ceases to trouble and anticipations of the future are not perturbing is a being wholly united with his environment and therefore fully alive. Art celebrates with peculiar intensity the moments in which the past reinforces the present and in which the future is a quickening of what now is. (p. 17)
Dewey (1934) connected the arts as a course of action for this type of living. Curriculum can be developed to teach children the practice of living in the present by creating opportunities to have meaningful, genuine experience with the esthetic. The senses are the way to engage the student in learning and meaning with the surrounding world. The arts engage the senses, and create a depth of experience. A person must experience both the ebbs and flows of the world around him/her to be fully engaged in a meaningful experience.

A curriculum that includes the arts is a way to allow for both opportunities for receptive and assertive behavior that allows for the full cultivation of the mind. Eisner (1998) also wrote of the good life, and its’ connection with the educational aim to develop multiple forms of literacy for the purpose of allowing access to this good life. He stated:

Each form of literacy has the capacity to provide unique forms of meaning and it is in the pursuit of meaning that much of the good life is lived. Schools serve children best when their programs do not narrow the kind of meanings they know how to pursue and capture. (p. 52)

The arts make these moments accessible and available to all people. The arts allow the individual see into his or her depths and the depths of the human capacity. The arts allow opportunities to experience the good life, and to realize human potential. If a society is full of thriving people, those people are more likely to give back to society, and this action furthers democracy.
The reasons why schools do not put an emphasis on the arts, and are dropping art programs at an alarming rate across the nation, are varied and complicated. The benefits of the arts in education and art in the life of the individual may not be easily measured and this could be a contributing factor as to why schools under pressure to measure success do not focus their curriculum on the arts. The benefits of artistic pursuits and the individual are potentially nothing less than self-fulfillment and the realization of human potential, and yet many individuals deny their own creative callings. The author of this thesis explored a body of reading that examined the topic of the nature of creativity and creative blocks.

**Perspectives on Creativity**

*The Nature of Creativity*

Creativity is an elusive process for many artists. It is common knowledge that artists have long struggled with beginning and sustaining creativity. There are many factors that affect one’s motivation to create. Various individuals from visual artists to writers have identified the nature of creativity and the blocks standing in the way of it.

Before one can identify things that serve to inhibit creativity, it would be prudent to settle on a common meaning for the word “creativity” as it is used in this project. Creativity is present in all people. Some people have learned to cultivate it and others have not. Creativity is the action of making something or bringing something into reality. It is a process. Various authors who have written about the creative process shared the perspective that every individual is creative. Creativity workshop
facilitator and author of *The Artist’s Way*, Julia Cameron (1992), pointed to the idea that creativity is inherent in the individual, she stated:

I have come to believe that creativity is our true nature, that blocks are an unnatural thwarting of a process at once as normal and as miraculous as the blossoming of a flower at the end of a slender green stem. (p. xxiii)

Creativity, in the individual, is like a seed. It has everything necessary in it to become the blossom that it was meant to be, but that potential is in latent form until it is given proper care. Without the necessary cultivation, the potential of that seed will be unrealized. Ken Robinson (2009), international leader in developing human potential, took a more cerebral approach to this idea. In his book *The Element*, he stated:

Creativity is very much like literacy. We take it for granted that nearly everybody can learn to read and write. If a person can’t read or write, you don’t assume that this person is incapable of it, just that he/she hasn’t learned how to do it. (2009, p. 58)

Choreographer and author Twyla Tharp (2003) took this concept a step further by claiming that creative impulses are not just present in each of us, but also have a specific manifestation according to the individual. She wrote:

I believe that we all have strands of *creative code* hard-wired into our imaginations. These strands are as solidly imprinted in us as the genetic code that determines our height and eye color, except they govern our creative impulses. They determine the forms we work in, the stories we tell, and how we tell them. (p. 37)
It is also understood that this inherent creativity is not always accessible to the individual. Anne Paris (2008), clinical psychologist and author of *Standing at the Waters Edge*, held the opinion that one can’t be creative all the time. She believed that “creativity is more of a psychological state and process” (p. 74). One’s ability to be immersed in creativity is affected by one’s ever-changing emotional or psychological state. She explained, “The moment-to-moment, project-to-project capacity to be creative emerges when we feel psychologically strong, safe and understood by others” (p. 74). Thus, the ability to reach a creative state is changeable. Therefore, creativity is an ongoing process. It is not an isolated event.

There are specific elements to a creative action. It is often agreed upon that creativity works side-by-side with the imagination. However, there is a necessary component to creativity, and that is action. According to Robinson (2009):

> Imagination can be entirely internal. You could be imaginative all day long without anyone noticing. But you would never say that someone was creative if that person never did anything. To be creative you actually have to do something. It involves putting your imagination to work to make something new, to come up with new solutions to problems, even to think of new problems or questions. (p. 67)

There is a nuance to what makes action creative, and that is the “new”. It is not enough to just produce something. One must create something new or in a new way to be considered creative. One who simply copies another’s creative pursuits may be seen as building skills, but certainly not as being creative.
Producing something without connections is not necessarily being creative. In order to be creative, one must connect in new ways with others or with their art form to be engaged in the creative process. One may pull from past experience and connect that to the present to engage in the creative process. Tharp (2003) spoke to this truth when she stated, “Creativity is more about taking facts, fictions, and feelings we store away and find new ways to connect them” (p. 64). Creativity is not just about imagination; it is about making connections.

**Creative Blocks**

Standing in the way of creativity are blocks. They take many forms. Blocks serve to obstruct the creative flow within the individual. Generally speaking, blocks are a function of the psyche. Blocks, to some degree, are an attempt to keep one’s ego, or identity, intact. The book *A New Earth* written by Eckhart Tolle (2005) addressed the ego or what the author refers to as the “illusory self”, he had this to say about the nature of the ego:

In normal everyday usage, “I” embodies the primordial error, a misperception of who you are, an illusory sense of identity. This is the ego. The illusory sense of self is what Einstein, who had deep insights not only into the reality of space and time but also into human nature, referred to as “an optical illusion of consciousness.” That illusory self then becomes the basis for all further interpretations, or rather misinterpretations of reality, all thought processes, interactions, and relationships. Your reality becomes a reflection of the original illusion. (pp. 27-28)
When a person looks at the main fears that block the creative process, he/she will find that these blocks serve to keep the illusion of one’s self whole and unchanged. Some of the characteristics of the ego were originally formed by the individual’s need for survival. These characteristics are reinforced throughout that individual’s life. During the earliest stages of development, the child learns through conditioning, what behaviors will and will not serve to promote survival. Later, these survival tactics may turn into fears. Author Steven Pressfield (2002) spoke to the concept of fear and self-preservation in his book *The War of Art* he wrote, “because our existence is physical and thus vulnerable to innumerable evils, we live and act out of fear in all we do” (p. 137). It is necessary for the artist or individual who wishes to engage in the creative process to recognize that this need for survival or self-preservation may have a lasting psychological effect that may impede his or her ability to create. Some of the fears that an individual might experience link him or her to a primitive need to be accepted. It served the individual well to be supported, included and accepted by the group or tribe. One may be working against a sense of fear of rejection that is based in an evolutionary need to be a part of the group. As Pressfield stated, “Evolution has programmed us to feel rejection in our guts. This is how the tribe enforced obedience, by wielding the threat of expulsion. Fear of rejection isn’t just psychological, it’s biological. It’s in our cells” (p. 87).

Many people operate from a place of fear in their everyday lives. Author Susan Jeffers of *Feel the Fear…and do it Anyway* (1987) identified such fears as “Level 2 Fears”. She listed such fears as: a fear of rejection, success, failure, being vulnerable,
helplessness, being conned, disapproval, and loss of image (p. 6). Often these fears that block creativity have an element of connection to other’s thoughts, perceptions and opinions. These ego-based fears prove to keep us in a state of homeostasis, generalizing into a fear of change. People are afraid of change, and would rather stay with the familiar, even if it were to their detriment, than to try something new. Tharp (2003) asserted, “the unknown is a fearful place, and anything new is a step into the unknown” (p. 23). One’s ego is in part defined by what others think, say and do to that individual. Because it relies on the input of others, the ego is fragile.

The action of creating and putting one’s self out in the world in the form of art, is a practice in being vulnerable. The individual who is engaged in the creative process and actively producing material for others to experience, is subject to scrutiny, and criticism. The artist will experience fear from time to time due to this exposure. Creative persons benefit from using fear as an opportunity for growth. Jeffers (1987) stated, “We can’t escape fear. We can only transform it into a companion that accompanies us in all our exciting adventures; it is not an anchor holding us transfixed in one spot” (p. 21). When one takes an attitude of growth in respect to fear, he/she can transform that fear into a teacher. Steven Pressfield (2002) identified fear as an indicator for areas in which an individual needs growth. He connected the experience of fear with the feeling of resistance. In regards to this, he stated:

The more fear we feel about an enterprise, the more certain we can be that that enterprise is important to us and to the growth of our soul. That’s why we feel so much Resistance. If it meant nothing to us, there’d be no Resistance. (p. 40)
Going into this place of discomfort is seen as a way to growth or evolving as an individual. Pushing past the pain or fear can lead to expansion, creating space for new things and self-discovery. Twyla Tharp (2003) knew this and she suggested that the better one knows one’s self, the better able they are to push the limits of their comfort zones. She suggested that one would be rewarded for this behavior, as “our ability to grow is directly proportional to an ability to entertain the uncomfortable” (Tharp, p. 47).

Author Susan Jeffers (1987) held the opinion that a lack of trust in one’s self is the underlying factor in all their fears. Therefore, pushing the boundaries of what is comfortable to the individual, and exploration and recognition of one’s fears is a way to build trust in one’s self. Jeffers wrote, “Every time you encounter something that forces you to “handle it”, your self-esteem is raised considerably. You learn to trust that you will survive, no matter what happens. And in this way your fears are diminished immeasurably” (p. 107).

Knowing that these fears exist and block the creative process, the question or challenge that many have wrestled with is; “how does one move past these blocks or fears?”

Calling on Creativity

*Overcoming Creative Blocks*

Overcoming obstructions to the creative process is a subject broached by many authors. The processes involved in getting past blocks to a place of creativity have
been written about extensively. Creativity can be accessed with changes in both behaviors and attitudes.

**Behavioral Changes**

Planning for creativity has been identified as a general behavior that can set the individual on the path to greater productivity. Planning is a part of developing creative habits, and can be done in a variety of ways.

Planning can be a receptive process, where information or stimulus serves to fill up the imaginative reserves of the individual, and aids in creative inspiration. This kind of preparation is addressed in Julia Cameron’s (1992) book *The Artist’s Way*. She encouraged the aspiring artist to plan *artist dates* into his or her week. The artist date is an important habit that opens the individual to receive insights, guidance and inspiration. This habit involves taking time every week to nurture one’s “creative consciousness” by experiencing the world around him or her in an intentional way (pp. 9-20). Spending quality time to nurture one’s creative soul is key to cultivating one’s capacity for artistic work. Twyla Tharp (2003) called this type of action *scratching*. Scratching is an active way to turn up ideas or search out inspiration. One can practice scratching by changing one’s environment, reading books, or looking to others for ideas or inspiration. Scratching can help guide the individual to make connections, create thematic unification, and be inspired in his/her own creative work (pp.94-95).

While the artist can benefit from those receptive practices mentioned above, behaviors that allow for the purging of ideas and thoughts in order to clear the way for the flow of creativity, is seen as an essential form of planning for creativity by those
who have explored this topic. Julia Cameron (1992) instructed the aspiring artist to write *morning pages*. The morning pages allow the individual to write in stream-of-consciousness fashion to get out the thoughts that get in the way of creativity. This is a space where one might work through some of the psychological fears that have arose and serve to inhibit the creative process. She ascertained that it is necessary for one to write in this manner in order to get around the logical, censoring part of one’s brain to the artistic, inventive part (pp. 9-18). As well, this type of writing can aid to shift old beliefs and thought processes in order to create space for new ideas. Another activity used to tap into an experiential, creative mode in the individual is “Eyes Wide Open”, developed by Sacramento State University professor, Karen Benson. This activity is based in observation, sensory experience, and writing. It allows the individual to access creative flow without judging or editing, and helps to develop a practice of experiencing and recording the unedited flow of one’s imagination (K. Benson, Lecture, September, 2008).

Making creativity a habit will help one to begin to be more productive and sustain that productivity. Tharp (2003) explained “In order to be habitually creative, you have to know how to prepare to be creative” (p. 119). One way to prepare for creativity is to make the practice of creativity a ritual. One of the most difficult things for a blocked artist to do is to begin. Steven Pressfield (2002) wrote about this action. He identified “resistance” to sitting down to begin one’s creative work. This resistance needs to be overcome, even if just in practice. In other words, a person does not need to intend to paint a masterpiece or write *the* screenplay that will win him or her critical
acclaim. That person needs to sit down everyday and develop the habit of engaging in the creative process. Pressfield said:

   When we sit down day after day and keep grinding, something mysterious starts to happen. A process is set into motion by which, inevitably and infallibly, heaven comes to our aid. Unseen forces enlist in our cause; serendipity reinforces our purpose. (p. 108)

One’s efforts to make creativity a habit are rewarded with inspiration and greater creative productivity.

   Skill development is another form of planning that can benefit one who wishes to be creatively productive. Pressfield (2002) makes the distinction between the behaviors of the amateur versus the professional. He connects these dispositions with one’s ability to get past resistance to creativity. He defines the professional by his or her dedication to his or her passion. He sees the professional as committing to that passion full time with full dedication. The amateur pursues something half-heartedly, without full commitment. He further points to the actions taken by the professional versus the amateur. The professional works to develop skills in order to be prepared when inspiration hits, Pressfield stated that “the professional dedicates himself to mastering technique not because he believes technique is a substitute for inspiration but because he wants to be in possession of the full arsenal of skills when inspiration does come” (p. 84). Choreographer and author Twyla Tharp (2003) thinks of skill development as one of the tools for realizing artistic vision, and essential as a way around blocks. In her book, The Creative Habit, she said “Skill is how you close the
gap between what you can see in your mind’s eye and what you can produce; the more skill you have, the more sophisticated and accomplished your ideas can be” (p. 163). Developing one’s skill in a particular area is a form of planning.

Practicing behaviors that are conducive to artistic production is one part of the process necessary to breaking through creative blocks. Another change that has been identified as necessary to moving past creative blocks is a change in one’s attitude.

*Attitude Changes*

Thinking positively is a practice that can change the way one experiences life. When one operates with a “yes” attitude, he/she is more able to embrace things that happen in life with an attitude of empowerment rather than that of a victim. Susan Jeffers (1987) wrote about how one can change one’s perspective to empower. She claimed that “each time you can see the gift in life’s obstacles, you can handle difficult situations in a rewarding way. Each time you have the opportunity to stretch your capacity to handle the world, the more powerful you become” (p. 33). An artist can benefit from this type of attitude, as he/she will no doubt experience some failures or criticism during the course of his/her artistic career. After seeing the affects of positive self-talk and consequent positive thinking, on the physical bodies strength during her workshops, Jeffers decided that “there is absolutely no question that learning to think more positively will pull you closer and closer to finding your own power” (p. 64). The power she referred to was the power to overcome fears and adversity. To be able to face one’s fears with the help of positive affirmations and ridding the mind of the “chatterbox”, whose habit it is to fill the subconscious with negativity and self-doubt,
is necessary for the individual to move forward in his/her creative recovery. These changes in attitude are a conscious decision, a proactive stance against the habit of playing the part of the victim to the old stories and negativity that the brain plays out again and again in order to keep us in the same place, without growth or forward movement.

In contrast to this, one can further change his/her attitudes and previous held beliefs by accepting the possibility of a higher power working to support his/her creative recovery. The individual must work to give up perceived control and open up to the “universal flow”. Julia Cameron (1992) referred to this as “engaging the Great Creator in discovering and recovering our creative powers” (p.xxi). Some call this higher power “God”; others refer to this same source as the “universe.” Jeffers (1987) stated:

The term “universe” refers to that life plan that seems to take over despite what we have in mind—that “force” operating seemingly on its own, that often interferes with our picture of how we like things to be. It refers to a certain flow in our lives and the lives of others over which we have little or no control. (p. 143)

The individual interested in recovering his/her creativity would benefit from letting go of the ego and trusting in this higher power while working to practice creativity in his/her life.

The concept of a higher power can be further evidenced in the idea that some hold regarding specific talents or abilities that are “god-given” or present at birth.
Many authors have written about the importance of the individual’s development of those talents. A prospective artist would benefit from recognition and acceptance of these abilities or talents. This can set him/her on a path towards greater creative fulfillment. Ken Robinson (2009) stated, “finding and developing our creative strengths is an essential part of becoming who we really are” (p. 23). His perspective on this matter was based on abilities and aptitudes, while other authors hold a more spiritual point of view regarding one’s potential. According to author Steven Pressfield (2002) “We come into this world with a specific personal destiny. We have a job to do, a calling to enact, a self to become. We are who we are from the cradle and we are stuck with it” (p. 146), here he refers to one’s calling or gift. According to this concept, the artist becomes a vessel to this higher spiritual flow, and works to realize his/her potential. It is precisely when an individual listens to his/her own inner voice that such a force steps in to aid him/her in the creative process. Julia Cameron (1992) stated “We call it anything but what it is---the hand of God, or good, activated by our own hand when we act in behalf of our truest dreams, when we commit to our own soul” (p. 64). An artist can call on creativity by means of practical or behavioral modifications, as well as shifts in attitudes or beliefs. It is with the help of these changes that he/she can begin to move around creative blocks to greater productivity.

The author of this thesis engaged in the processes of creative recovery using the methods described in this section. She used narrative research to record and
analyze her experiences with those processes. The following chapter illustrates for the reader how the author experienced those processes and subsequent artistic productivity.
Chapter 3

NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Personal History

Narrative Research or Narrative Inquiry is a form of qualitative research that approaches understanding behavior through collections of anecdotal material. This type of research has been employed as a tool for analysis in the area of education, amongst others. The ultimate aim of this type of research is to study the human experience. The author uses narrative research to create connections and gain understanding of her experience from creative stagnancy to creative productivity. The author used journaling and written reflections to illustrate her experience during the process of recovering creativity and creating a body of ceramic work to be shown in a group exhibit. The following is an account of that experience.

This narrative inquiry begins with a reflection on my personal history and relationship with the arts. Looking back on my earliest experiences with the arts, not only creates a context for the reader, but also is where my creative recovery began. Looking back at experiences helps to name things, and identifying the structures of my beliefs helped to shift or move them into change. Since the goal of this culminating experience was, in part, to regain creative inspiration and productivity, change was necessary to reaching that goal.

Early Experiences With the Arts

Ever since I was a small child, I had the urge to create. If a piece of paper was put in front of me I would fill it with doodles and designs, and before I knew it, an
hour would have gone by without any awareness of time passing, on my part. I was praised as a young child for my ability to draw beyond what was expected of someone my age. I remember very clearly, the family doctor keeping a picture that I drew for him paper – clipped to my file. He was impressed with my drawing, not because it was anything more than a stick figure, but because I took special care to make each finger proportional to one another.

I remember winning art contests as a young child and when I was in high school. Friends would request my drawings and hang them on the walls of their bedrooms. My siblings would enlist my help when illustrations for reports and papers were needed. Although I was praised for my inherent artistic abilities, I was also becoming aware of negative judgments in regards to the arts. My public school experience, up until high school, did not include art. Something like creating holiday crafts was the only experience that came close to art exposure during those years. It seemed that the world around me held the idea that while creating something beautiful, or engaging in creative pursuits was a nice hobby or pastime, it was not something to be taken seriously. My mother, seeing my natural abilities, brought me to a few art classes outside of school, but that was a limited experience as well. The arts did not hold the same status as the academic classes, and I was aware of those value systems. There was a real sense of art being “other” than academics. My journaling reveals this awareness in an entry I made, in response to a writing prompt designed to identify “core negative beliefs” (pp. 30-33) from The Artist’s Way (Cameron, 1992). I reflected on my thinking as a child about my particular talents:
Why couldn’t I be smart or good at reading, writing, or math? I wish I was gifted at something that mattered, something that would elevate my status. No, I could draw pretty pictures, something that put me in an “other” category. (J. H. Ray, personal journal, March 6, 2009)

Academics were the holy grail of high school. Art was something you did if you couldn’t do anything else. If I look back at my high school yearbook, I can be found on the art pages. My art can be found on the pages of the yearbook, as well. I still have a collection of all my pieces that won awards, such as a drawing that was chosen for designing the choir shirt, and the baseball program with my original art on the cover. Although my art was being used to advertise the various teams and groups at our school, no one ever spoke of possible careers or paths in the arts. The arts were marginalized by the educational system that I experienced.

College Experiences with the Arts

Working with my hands, and creating art was an area where I excelled without much practice or training. I had a natural ability in this area. I ended up in junior college, by default. I didn’t know what other options I had, for my future, at that time. I continued to keep trying to fit a square peg in a round hole. I fought my way through those years at junior college, nearly failing out of the first semester. When I look back at my transcripts, there is a truth being spoken, not so subtly, in the extremes of the grades I earned. There in black and white are high marks in the arts and low marks in everything else. My art classes are probably what got me through those early years of higher education. I remember purposefully arranging my schedule with art classes
sprinkled in between the academic classes, as a kind of carrot to keep me going forward through my Associates Degree.

I remember those years in junior college, wanting so badly to be good at science or math, or anything that was generally acknowledged as valuable, and could be compensated monetarily in the business world. I continued to take art classes in order to coax myself through the courses that were required to move on to a four-year college. It was art that kept me going through higher education. I excelled at my art classes, while I was slowly gaining the study skills and follow through to succeed in my other classes.

I continued on from junior college to transfer to a four-year college as a “Liberal Studies” major, and went on to start a “Speech Pathology and Audiology” degree. I had the intention to use that degree to teach the deaf. Being visual, and possessing good fine motor skills allowed me to excel in the area of signing. At the time, I liked the idea of being of service to people and society. Looking back at this factor that motivated my decision making when choosing my major, I can identify a much larger factor that will creep into many areas of my life and ultimately affect my beliefs and actions in regard to the arts. That factor is the behaviors of a codependent or people pleasing personality. This will be discussed later in this section. I believe these attitudes led me to seek this particular field of deaf studies. My need to feel valued or validated in the world, led me to choose a field of study that would qualify me to pursue a job where one serves others.
During the course of my studies, the program took a direction that I did not believe I was well suited, and I found myself rethinking the area of my study. By this time, I had been in college for three years, and felt that I needed to make a quick decision and move forward. I decided to study art. I remember feeling disappointed in myself. I found myself defending my choice to friends and family. The same question came up over and over again; “What will you do with a degree in art?” I didn’t have an answer for that question. Who would I serve with a degree in art? It was a battle between heart and head. I remember making a conscious decision to study studio art.

Once I changed my major to Art. I found myself engaged and motivated in my studies. I found my tribe and I was making art again. I felt engaged in the creative processes and this was a satisfying feeling. My professors were passionate, interesting people who loved what they did. I found myself enjoying what I was doing. As long as I didn’t try to look ahead to the future and what I should or could do with a degree in art, I felt a certain sense of fulfillment. However, those issues continued to enter my brain as I moved closer to graduating and entering “the real world”. While in college I was engaged in the creative process through course work and assignments. Through my studies, I found two areas that really interested me: glass blowing and foundry work.

After completing my Bachelor’s in Art, I was in the mode that many recent college graduate students find themselves in; one of exploration of freedom after so many years of commitment. I half-heartedly explored the idea of working in the studio arts. I worked with a glass artist, but he was barely able to make a living in the arts
himself. This did not make me think well of my prospects to survive as an artist. I worked for a couple of years doing odd jobs. One of the jobs I worked was as a Teacher’s Aide in a Kindergarten through Eighth grade art class. Working in the classroom as an aide to an art teacher starting me thinking about becoming a teacher myself. After completing prerequisite coursework, I was accepted into the single subject credential program at Sacramento State.

I was excited about the prospects of teaching in an area that brought me satisfaction and fulfillment. However, I was quickly discouraged with the attitudes of the professors in the teaching credential program at Sacramento State. I found myself experiencing some of those old feelings of segregation from the ever-important academics. The professors in this program rarely, if ever used art curricula as an example for lesson planning, or specifically addressed the needs of the art classroom, during the entirety of the program. They taught to the academics and treated art education as secondary. I felt slighted and questioned my decision to teach art. I knew going into this area, that finding employment might be difficult, however I did not expect to find those in higher education to be so dismissive of the subject matter itself. I felt myself on the defensive. As it turns out this would be a posture that I would find myself in for the years to come as I enter the teaching field.

Experiences as an Art Teacher

After finishing my credential it took me three years to find a job teaching art. However, I did eventually find full time employment as a middle school visual arts teacher. I felt like I had finally arrived. Here was my chance to offer an art program
that validated the arts and created a space for those kids, like myself, who had not found a place in the educational system where they could thrive and excel. That excitement would quickly diminish, as I would find myself defending what I teach to a staff that does not understand the value of the visual arts, and the teaching of the whole child.

My experience, during those first years of teaching, in this system, is not unique to me as an individual or as an art teacher. Many new teachers come out of their credential programs with unique and inspiring ways to teach, only to be squelched by standards and testing, and the general reality of the public school system. My experience was much the same. I was given free reign of the content I was to teach in my classroom. However, I believe now that this was a signal that the arts are not seen as important, for there was a lack of concern regarding the art curriculum at this school. As well, there was no money available for materials or curriculum resources. I worked for the first three years as an art teacher, but in order to keep my full-time status, I had to teach outside my area of expertise. All the while, coming up against attitudes, of the staff, regarding the importance of art compared to that of the academics.

I worked hard to establish a meaningful curriculum that would support critical thinking skills of the students, while engaging them in the study of fine arts and the humanities. Since day one at the job, I struggled to feel validated and valued at this school site. The arts are viewed as secondary to the academics, and seen as “fluff”, not
something necessarily worth time, money, or importance in this particular school setting.

I have enjoyed introducing kids to the arts, and exposing them to other cultures and history through art. I have seen many kids grow as individuals when they experience success in the art class. On the other hand, my experience as an art teacher has been one of complete disillusionment. I worked for five years with total dedication to my job, to be cut down to half-time employment. The staff and administration around me still do not value the benefits of a quality art program to the growth and development of the individual. These struggles, in addition to an injury sustained while on the job, nearly led me to a nervous breakdown during the 2007-2008 school year.

I decided, after five years on this current job, to take a leave of absence. I had a back injury that needed to be dealt with, and was questioning my choice of career paths due to the prior stated issues. My back injury, did not allow me to participate in my life the same way that I had in the past. Physical activity has played a major role in the quality and satisfaction in my life. I found myself in a position where I could not engage in most physical activities without experiencing intolerable back and leg pain. I took the 2008-2009 school year off to try to explore new areas of development, but found myself unable to work or play due to this injury. Further complications arose due to this pain, when I broke my own hand after one of many sleepless nights. I found myself at what I perceived to be my lowest, low. I was scared, in pain, and the idea of an entire year ahead of me with nothing I could do or focus on was
overwhelming. In a moment of clarity, I wondered if going back to school to further my education could be a possibility.

As I searched the Sacramento State website for application deadlines, I began to lose hope, as I was seemingly too late to apply for any of the Master’s programs. I was in tears, feeling hopeless when as if by synchronicity, I caught sight of a folder from a summer workshop I had taken a few years earlier. Over the course of my five years teaching art, I took several curriculum development workshops through the California Consultancy for Arts Education. At these workshops, I became familiar with one professor from Sacramento State, Crystal Olson. She would stop by these workshops to inform the participants of the Master’s cohort in Curriculum and Instruction at Sacramento State. This program was of interest to me, but I had felt too busy and overwhelmed, in the past, to ever consider joining. Literally, minutes later, I found myself on the phone with Crystal Olson. She suggested that I come to class the following evening to check it out. That next night, she graciously accepted me into the program, and right then and there I was on my way. With the pain I was suffering, I found the challenge and focus on class work to be a welcome “distraction” to keep me from thinking about my pain, and the future of my health which was at this particular time, unknown. I dove into the program with eagerness in order to remain present in my thinking and being, rather than dwell on the past or the future.

*Graduate Studies Experience*

It is within this context that I began the Master’s program at Sacramento State. Removed from my negative work setting, and surrounded by people passionate about
the arts, I found myself engaged, and fired up about the ideals of Arts Education. I found myself experiencing feelings of validation for what I do as a teacher, and who I am (at this time latently) as an artist.

As a cohort, we began our journey by studying the writings of those who advocate the importance of the arts in education. These authors put eloquently into words, what I had come to know through my own journey, about what and how the arts can teach the individual, and the value that these experiences have for our society. I knew in my heart, all that I had learned from engaging in art experiences over the years, but my head had begun to side with those who devalued the arts. I had started to believe what they were saying. Reading the work of Dewey (1934) and Arnstine (1967), began the shift in the way I have come to believe in the arts.

During the course of this program, it became necessary to decide which pathway I would take to complete my studies. I was torn. On the one hand, I was fired up about the fact that funds for art in the schools are ever decreasing, and yet the arts contribute invaluably to the whole child. I wanted to ride this momentum and take the word to the streets in the form of advocacy for a culminating project. Yet, there was a part of me that still needed convincing. I had to ask myself the question; “If engaging in artistic pursuits is so fulfilling and valuable, then why am I not engaged in such activities in my own personal life?” It was time to explore my own creativity. This was something I never gave myself permission to do in my life. I chose the pathway: artist as educator, and began my journey to creativity.
Culminating Experience Spring 2009

I set out to start the process of recovering my creative self. This process began with collecting books on the subject of creativity. I chose to begin by reading Julia Cameron’s (1992) *The Artist’s Way* first. This book outlines a 12-week plan for the recovery of the blocked artist. In accordance with the book, I got a journal and began to write. According to Cameron:

> While there is no quick fix for instant, pain-free creativity, creative recovery (or discovery) is a teachable, trackable spiritual process. Each of us is complex and highly individual, yet there are common recognizable denominators to the creative recovery process. (p. 5)

A bit skeptical about this claim, I was willing to give it a try. After all, I needed a place to begin this process.

This particular program requires the individual to engage in two constant practices *morning pages* and *artist dates*. The morning pages are daily, stream-of-consciousness writings. The idea is that these pages allow us to hear past our inner censor to our true feelings. The artist dates are weekly explorations, meant to inspire and guide the artist. Between the morning pages and the artist dates, the individual is both authentically expressive and receptive. Throughout this process I worked with both the morning pages, and the artist dates diligently.

Early on, the pages of my journals reveal a sense of ambivalence in my life and towards working as an artist. As the author in the first pages of the book warns, my subconscious was working tirelessly to hi-jack my creativity. I set out to begin
working on a painting. I struggled for two weeks around the issue of space. At the time, I was living in 900 square feet with my boyfriend, and trying to claim some of that area as a studio. I struggled with the logistics of set up and clean up. I found myself not working due to the fact that the rewards did not justify the amount of time and energy it took to get started. I found myself not working on my art because of this. However, I continued with my journaling and artist dates. I decided that I wanted to explore oils as a new medium. I set up an area in the living room to paint, and gave myself permission to leave everything out, so that I would be more inclined to work knowing that I did not have to waste time on the set up and clean up.

I had never worked with oils before and struggled with the medium. I began a painting of my boyfriend’s geriatric dog, hoping to complete the piece, and give it to him to keep as she is getting towards the end of her life. I noted in my journaling that in the past, I would often give myself permission to create only when I was “making something” for someone else. One of many journal entries reveals this recurrent theme:

Interestingly, when I think back to the times when I was engaged in creativity outside of school/classes, I was making something for someone. In fact, even in college, I would use my mother for inspiration to open-ended assignments, by thinking of gifts that I could make for her to enjoy. Is this a matter of giving myself permission to create? Is it a lack of creativity? Do I have nothing to say with my art? These are questions to consider and explore. When do I allow myself to do creative work? It is no wonder that my first piece is, in a sense, a
gift for Will, a picture of his beloved dog. (J. H. Ray, personal journal, March 9, 2009)

Through journaling and reading I came to a place of understanding in regards to this inclination. It became clear to me, through my writings such and these and others, that this was an expression of codependent behaviors. A valuing of myself only in relation to another person, or what I could do for other people in my life. Creating art for self-expression, or self-satisfaction wasn’t going to serve anyone but myself, and I was accustomed to serving others, not myself. I did not see the value in creating art, if it did not serve anyone, just as many of my actions in my life were not (at this time) about authentic experience, so much as they were about what I thought the people around me wanted or needed from me. Therefore, doing my art was always put on the back burner behind everyone else’s needs.

Understanding this type of behavior in myself became key to the process of opening new doors to creativity and self-discovery. Coupled with the fact that I had come to believe, over the years, that creating art was indulgent and somewhat narcissistic, led to a huge block in terms of making art in my own personal life. Through the readings I have referenced, on creativity, and this process, I have come to see artistic endeavors from a different point of view. This process has allowed me to open up to what many authors refer to as a greater power, or universal flow.

It took me several months of struggling with oils, and sorting through my emotional and psychological baggage to get to a place where I could see what I needed to do to get some forward momentum. I was feeling that my heart was not in painting.
I was having a hard time with the drying time and the smell in the house, and was finding it a chore to do my art. I have always been a very physical person, and I am drawn to areas in art that are more physical such as glass blowing and ceramics. I decided that I needed to work in clay. Part of my struggle was getting to the bottom of what I wanted. I had gotten so out of touch with my own needs that I had to unearth this particular need from its place buried deep under false desires and people pleasing.

I set up a space in my father’s studio. Gave myself permission to drive an hour, out and back, twice a week. After this decision was made, the body of work that makes up this culminating experience began to reveal itself to me.

Our spring semester at Sacramento State had ended, and I was excited about my recent decision to focus on ceramic work rather than painting. I had been keeping, not only a journal for my thoughts and feelings, but also a journal for sketching and working out ideas for potential art pieces. I had sketched several pictures of lotus pods, as I find them to be interesting in form. The idea that such a beautiful flower could come from such a strange form appealed to my psyche in some way.
Figure 1. Balance, Clay and Glazes, Piece #1.
Previously, on one of my artist dates, I took a picture of a lotus flower in a pond. I was being drawn to this particular flower. I felt as though I needed to honor this attraction towards these images and forms that I was experiencing. I set out to create a ceramic sculpture using these images (see Figure 1). My intention was to create a box. I sketched out a shape that appealed to my aesthetics. This shape took the form of an elongated triangle for the lid, a proportionally smaller rectangular bottom, and a tripod-type base. When I work I generally have a sense of relative size and shape that appeals to me. In working out this general shape, I gave myself permission to go with what felt right without questioning my choices.

When I went back through my journal entries during the time I was constructing this piece, I found that many of my thoughts were focused on my recovery from my back and hand injuries. I was wrestling with finding a balance in my life. When I found out about my herniated discs in August of 2008, I chose to go into the pain and use it as a life lesson that I could grow from. Eckhart Tolle (2005) wrote about suffering being connected to the individual’s growth. He said that if people did not suffer “they would not evolve as human beings and would remain shallow, identified with the external form of things. Suffering drives you deeper” (p. 102). It is with this type of belief that I accepted the overarching lesson I was being taught by my pain. That was one of finding a balance in life. I had been in a state of constant “doing” for many years. The back injury took my ability to “do” many things away. I had to learn to “be.” I had never done this before. At the time of this piece (see Figure 1), I found myself working on a balance between doing and being. This piece
reflects that frame of mind. It is also symbolic of the hidden gifts in my injury. Just as the beautiful Lotus blossom emerges from this strange pod growing from the murky depths of a pond, the scary prospect of being in pain for the rest of my life brought me to a greater appreciation for the quiet places in my life. I found the process of creating this piece to be a kind of homage to that lesson. My intention in creating this piece was to explore my curiosities of the lotus form and habitat, while allowing myself room for the piece to grow on its own. I felt a kind of focus and flow while working on this piece. I logged in a total of 40 hours on the construction and glazing of *Balance*.

I used slab construction for the lid and box bottom, the pinch pot method for constructing the pods, and coiling method for the tripod. I had taught hundreds of students these techniques, but never used them on my own personal art. I felt quite competent with these methods, and came up against very few problems during the construction. The most challenging part was coming up with a solution for the tripod, as I wanted the parts to all look organic, yet be sturdy enough to hold up. I think the solution I came up with was quite successful.
After watching a show on Japanese Ikebana, I started sketches that led to Paper Lantern (Figure 2). The idea of elevating something simple appealed to me. I have always been drawn to the cherry blossom and also to paper lanterns. I had
photographed cherry blossoms in the past, and pulled the photos up to explore the possibilities of creating such a soft and delicate blossom out of clay. I decided to attempt to make a paper lantern out of clay and give the idea of it hanging on a cherry blossom branch. My original intention was to make this piece a functional box, however after spending many hours on the lantern texture, I decided not to push my luck with cutting off a lid. I did not want to risk ruining the effect that I created and potentially ruin the piece after such a large time investment. When I reviewed my journal entries during the time of constructing this piece, I see a connection between the final piece and experiences surrounding the construction of the piece. I had recently come back from a 10-day road trip with a friend. I had experienced this friend as not allowing herself to be vulnerable. I saw myself in her and her guardedness. I came to a huge realization about myself through this trip. This realization was about being guarded and overly rigid in actions could be ugly and unfeminine. I think I have hidden my feminine nature out of fear of vulnerability and thus lost some of my authentic nature through those fears.

This piece is an expression of the beauty in fragile things. This is my expression of valuing the feminine, both in this art piece and in myself. I used the same clay that I usually work with. I threw a slab and used slab construction to create the lantern, the branch and the petals of the flower. I used all under glazes, and decided to use clear coat the flowers while keeping the rest of the piece matte in finish. I used a ribbing tool to create the lantern texture. A total of 37 hours were spent to complete this piece. I learned not to create too many tight and difficult to reach spaces
from struggling with glazing the previous piece. I was able to use that prior knowledge to plan ahead on this piece and avoid that situation again. This planning cut down on the time spent glazing.

Chair, Clay and Glazes, Piece # 3

Figure 3. Chair, Clay and Glazes, Piece # 3.
Figure 3 is a sculpture inspired by the chair that I use at work as an art teacher. I began this piece as I was returning to school after a year “leave of absence.” I was having some mixed emotions about returning to work. I had experienced much pain and disillusionment during my five years as an art teacher in a middle school. This piece reflects some of those emotions that were coming up in regards to this event in my life. This sculpture is about entering back into a position that led me to the edge of a nervous breakdown. It is an exploration of my thinking processes regarding my ability to go back to the same job and do it in a different way. I was questioning my ability to do my job in a more balanced and sane way. Consciously I was hoping to use the lessons that I had learned about balance and vulnerability and gain strength that I could draw on while entering back into a hostile environment.

The chair represents my “position” in life. The blackbird is a personal symbol that I use. They are a recurrent image in my art. They represent feelings of the unknown or the mystery of life. The dragonfly is a symbol for the feminine. I created organic forms to represent nature and my connection with the wild, untamed part of life. I find strength in those things. All of these images came together during the time that I was processing this change in my life.

My intention was to make a box. I sat down and sketched the image of the birds landing on my school chair. I let the images reveal themselves to me. It is in the looking back that I am able to see clearly how the images connect to my process at the time of creating this piece. This was a process that I had not really used in the past. In the past I would work from an idea and try to make the form or the image represent
my idea. This new way of working is much more in line with the idea of letting things flow, uninterrupted from the unconscious to the art form. I have found that things reveal themselves to me when I don’t work too hard to control them. I have found a truth and authenticity in working this way. Working this way requires that I listen to my inner artist and don’t question the choices that I make.

Through the course of this culminating process I have learned to trust in my choices. I have learned to value the fact that I am drawn to images or ideas for a reason. The reasons may not be on a conscious level at the time that they are chosen.

I used slab technique to create the box structure and the chair. Molding and sculpting techniques were used for the crows and the vine-type shapes. A subtractive, cutting technique was used to create the window around the dragonfly. At this point, I have learned from past pieces to make templates for everything. This was essential for creating the chair on this piece. I have become more familiar with the “stages of dryness” with my clay and have become more skillful at utilizing and identifying the clay at its most ideal stage for slab construction. However, I did get some cracking at the joints in this box. I repeated the under glaze and gloss glaze techniques from the previous piece, and used a highlighting of gloss overglaze to draw focus to the birds.

Little Creep, Clay, Wire and Glazes, Piece #4

The inspiration for this piece was self-awareness and the concept of codependency in relationships. At the time, I had become increasingly aware of my tendencies to “tap dance” for people. I realized that I was getting a false sense of self through the pursuit of the approval from those around me. This piece is about that
awareness (see Figure 4). I had been thinking about creating a ceramic doll for a while. I decided that I wanted to create a marionette. I looked up marionette construction on the Internet and drew a sketch of the doll that appears in this piece. I created a house around this figure and included several shadow boxes for symbolic items to be placed.

Figure 4. Little Creep. Clay and Glazes.
At the time that I created *Little Creep* I was feeling anemic and unable to give any more blood in my personal, and professional relationships. The marionette hanging lifelessly expresses those feelings. The overstuffed chair is a personal symbol that I use to represent mother-daughter relationships. It represents, for me, the things (both physical and psychic) that mothers pass on to their daughters. The heart represents love. The flower petals are a nod to the “he loves me, he loves me not” ritual that many women participate in at some point in their lives. The petals speak about my feelings of being unlovable. The crows are done using the sgrafitto technique in the surface of the ceramic house. This symbol embodies a sense of the mysteries of the unfolding of life and the fear that sometimes accompanies the fact that we really don’t have ultimate control of things.

My intention with this sculpture (see Figure 4) was to process my feelings around this need to please others at the cost of my own vitality. I hope that this piece will speak to women, specifically, and to those who do everything for everyone else but know little about what they need or want themselves. It is about valuing yourself for what you do, not who you are. She is a marionette, a puppet in the hands of whoever controls her. She is set into action only by someone else’s will.

I used slab construction to create the house. I had to work with the interior boxes first, and then create an internal structure using stilts and props to keep the boxes supported inside the frame. This was a complicated and time-consuming process. The hours spent on the basic house construction alone were 16 in total. Another 10 hours were spent on the construction of the doll, the chair, the heart, and
the flowers. The glazing, including the sgraffito technique totaled another 12 hours. A total of around 40 hours were spent on this piece.

This piece was not only the most difficult to construct, but it took the most time to finish. I had worked concurrently on this piece and piece #5 and #6. I believe I was stalled out on this piece for so long because it was more personal in conceptual content, and more narrative in nature. This piece was emotionally risky to create and put out in to the world. Therefore, I struggled for nine months to complete this sculpture. I was constantly coming back to it and piecing it together little by little.

By this time, I was able to be more ambitious with the Little Creep sculpture because I had successfully completed several previous pieces. I was able to build on my skill and knowledge base and stretch a bit further. I explored new areas in this piece including the sgraffito technique seen on the top of the house. I feel that this is one of the more successful areas on the piece. This piece builds on the narrative nature of the previous chair piece, where I had used symbolism to represent ideas and tell a personal story. This builds on that process.

_Boat on water, Clay and Glazes, Piece #5_

This box was inspired by two images that I had admired over the years (see Figure 5). I had always been drawn to Japanese artist Hokusais’ woodblock print _The Great Wave off Kanagawa_. I had always felt a connection to Vincent Van Gogh’s painting _Boat at Sainte-Marie_. These images were pasted into my journal. I had sat down one day and simply made a box using proportions that appealed to my sensibilities. I had no idea where I was going from there. I experimented by turning
the box on all different sides to see what appealed to me most. I gave myself permission with this box to let it be done quickly. I had been a bit bogged down by the fact that I had not totally finished the piece I had previously started, and I wanted to allow myself to move through the process of creating another piece without feeling a sense of obligation or weight on my shoulders about finishing a piece. I decided that I liked the box with the short dimension for its height and the long dimension for its width. I sat and looked at the box this way, and decided that it needed a boat sitting on top of it.

Figure 5. Boat on Water. Clay and Glazes.
I have boated for many years of my life. I have a deep connection with rivers, and I have always loved images of boats and waves and water. I decided that I wanted to pay homage to those aspects of my life as well as those paintings that I have enjoyed over the years.

In looking back to the time when I constructed this piece, I can see that I was drawn to these images for reasons related to my subconscious as well. I had been having recurrent dreams of crossing bodies of water and swimming in water. In dreams, water represents the emotions. I was going through a lot of change in my life at this time, so I believe these images are symbolic of those feelings. I had recently moved, and separated from my boyfriend of eleven years. This was the first piece that I created in my new space. My journal entry on January 26, 2010 reveals the type of feelings that inspired this piece. I wrote, “Everything is shifting and it is difficult to get my bearings” (J. H. Ray, personal journal). A wave is the outward, surface expression of what lies underneath; much like human emotion, which is often the outward expression of deeper feelings or experiences.

I had not planned to create a piece that expressed the turmoil that I was going through at the time, but rather the piece came from that state of mind. I allowed those feelings to come through by not editing the processes and choices that naturally occurred for me.

I used slab construction, under glazes and sgraffito to create this piece. I had enjoyed the effect that the sgraffito had on my previous piece, that I decided to carry that technique into this piece as focal point to the piece.
Culminating Experience

The body of work that came out of this experience was on display in a group show at the “Vox” gallery in Sacramento. I worked to label my pieces and write an artist statement that summarized my experience and the work that came from that experience. This was a challenging, yet fulfilling process. It was intimidating to show work of such a personal nature, however it was also necessary to attain a sense of closure for this time in my life. The art show was a new experience for me, as I had never shown my work in the past. I gained information about what goes into a show, and also the benefits of putting on a show for the artists.
Chapter 4

REFLECTION

My Personal Growth as an Artist

This culminating experience helped me to grow into a more creatively inspired, skillful, productive artist. Through reading and practice I have learned how to engage in creative processes and sustain a consistent level of productivity. I have developed the ability to recognize my needs, practice creative habits and foster attitudes that promote productivity. Through these efforts to change both my behaviors and attitudes, I gained greater access to artistic production.

In order to become more productive as an artist, I had to learn to pay attention to my own inner voice. Writing every day in a stream-of-consciousness fashion was key to hearing that voice. I came to realize that an artist needs a space where he/she can create. Creating a space that was practical and inspirational was essential to beginning my artwork. I needed to get in touch with my feelings and with myself in order to know my likes and dislikes so that I could create meaning and beauty in my work. Listening to my inner voice allowed me access to my creativity, and helped me to create artwork that is meaningful to me. Without self-awareness it is difficult to create authentic artwork. Through this process I have become more aware of myself, and my needs as an individual and as an artist.

Self-awareness has allowed me to see old habits and patterns in thinking that were keeping me from pursuing my art. As a result of this process I am able to identify fear and the sources of those fears. I discovered that the main source of fear for me
relates to the ego. Worrying about what others think of me or of my art had been a
debilitating factor in creating art in the past. Through this process I learned that art is
not a competition. It is not really even about the art product. It is about the process that
each individual goes through on his/her own journey to creativity. Julia Cameron
(1992) had this to say about creating artwork that is authentic to the artist:

> When we compete with others, when we focus on the marketplace, we are
> really jostling with other artists in a creative footrace. This is the sprint
> mentality. Looking for the short-term win, ignoring the long-term gain, we
> short-circuit the possibility of a creative life led by our own lights, not the klieg
> lights of fashion. (p. 174)

An artist has to first know himself/herself in order to be true to what he/she believes or
thinks or feels. I had to get to this place of personal authenticity before I could engage
in making art that would mean something to me.

The road to artistic productivity starts with simply doing the thing you wish to
do. I discovered that it is essential to make a habit of being creative in order to be
productive. Whether it is an artist date, or keeping a sketchbook, it is important to
engage in something creative or inspiring every day. You have to fill the well in order
to draw from it later. Reading about artists, taking a walk in nature, photographing
things that spark your curiosity are all ways to fill the creative well. It comes down to
having an experience, and engaging the world around you.

Trusting the creative process and surrendering control of my creative work
allowed for inspiration and creativity to come more readily and freely. I have learned
to trust the processes that I was following from the artist way, and I found them to be rewarding. I gave myself permission to not have a complete plan when starting a project, but rather to trust that I would make the right choices and edit in a way that has a personal truth behind it. I learned to let go of control and fears when it comes to my art. I experienced, first hand, the flow of the “universe” when I opened up to it and surrendered my individual will. I learned not to fear creative droughts, but to know that it is part of the process. I know that if I do not feel inspired on any particular day, that I need to continue with my journaling and artist’s dates, and allow myself to experience that drought without judgment or fear, but understand that it is all a part of the creative process.

Knowledge and Skills Gained in the Arts

This process has taught me that while it is important to allow for freedom and movement in my art, it is also good to have a plan in terms of the technical aspect of working with clay. I found it necessary to create paper templates for any slab construction in order to assure success in the construction process. Sketching ideas for three-dimensional work on to paper helped me with the aesthetic concerns regarding proportion and relative size of the various parts in a piece. I have become more proficient with proper clay construction as a result of this experience. I have learned about the most ideal stage in which to construct a slab box. I have learned the ideal stage in which to apply sgraffito technique to the surface of a clay piece. I have practiced and become quite competent in creating and firing complex structures made of clay.
Application of This Work as an Art Teacher

The insights that I gained through this culminating experience will inform me as an art teacher and impact the quality and effectiveness of my art program. I examined my own creative processes through this culminating experience. That examination has a direct correlation to my classroom and my teaching. The following are my discoveries and reflections as they relate to teaching and curricula.

Every individual is creative. Creativity manifests in specific and unique ways for every person. As an art teacher it is important to give students access to a variety of forms from which they can express themselves. It is necessary to cultivate visual literacy in the students that I teach in order to help them interpret and understand the world around them as well as to help them contribute to the world around them in their own unique way.

Practicing different forms of artistic expression makes one more competent in that area. A teacher who actively works at his/her art becomes a more competent teacher, and is better able to teach skills to his/her students. Possessing technical skills bridges the gap between what one sees in his/her imagination and what he/she is able to produce. Ultimately this increased proficiency leads to more sophisticated art and ideas, producing more innovative and creative individuals in a society.

It is an art teacher’s duty to provide ample opportunities for students to build on skills and learn new ones using various art forms. Providing such opportunities for students allows them to construct meaning through experience. As well, it provides opportunities to become familiar with a variety of modes of expression so that they
can be better able to know where their individual talents lie. Art teachers have a duty to provide a program and classroom environment that engages and inspires the student in the creative process. It behooves the art teacher to be a practicing artist so that he/she can provide these experiences for his/her students.

An art teacher needs to provide students with both technical skills, and ways to increase creativity and inspire his/her students. Students would benefit from keeping a journal and sketchbook, and dedicating time weekly to utilizing those materials. Having students develop the habit of journaling would help to cultivate creativity. Thought purging, stream-of consciousness writing, and “Eyes Wide Open” are prompts that the art teacher can use get his/her students in touch with their inner voices.

An art teacher should provide opportunities for his/her students to fill their artistic wells. Planning for field trips, going on sketching walks, photo-journaling, and reading about other artists are just a few ways to nurture the creative consciousness of the young artist.

Artistic expression is sometimes dependent on a favorable psychological state. It may also work to impact one’s mental state. It is important for any teacher to create a safe environment where children can learn. It is vital for an art teacher to give his/her students permission to explore their art free from ridicule in order to keep their self-esteem intact. Art production is affected by the individual’s emotional state.

Art can affect a person’s emotional state, and can therefore be used as a tool for personal growth. An art teacher can use the arts and design aspects of his/her
curriculum to help foster personal growth for the students. Art can help the individual process and work through struggles and adverse situations. A teacher who recognizes the capacity that the arts hold to help the individual through these growth processes can serve his/her community by creating better-adjusted students.

It is necessary to make connections between the classroom and the community in order to help validate the arts and those who find their talents in the arts by exposing them to working artists. As well, bringing the students’ work out in to the community would add value to their work and enhance their self-esteem.

Art needs to be taught in a meaningful way that promotes critical thinking. Art is a subject that connects easily to other academic curricula. Art in the classroom should be taught in a way that allows for students to make connections and construct meaning. A curriculum that includes all areas of the visual arts allows for these dispositions in students. This type of art curriculum serves to further educate the whole child.

A meaningful art curriculum should be a part of every child’s education. As educators, if we are to teach the whole child, we cannot leave the arts out of their education. Among other things, the arts teach visual literacy, critical thinking, innovation, and creativity. The arts help prepare the child for his/her future, as well as lead them to a life of greater fulfillment.
My Personal Journey and Projections for Future Work

The experience was critical to my personal journey from a blocked artist to an artist who can access her creativity regularly. As well, I grew from this experience as an art teacher to become more effective and inspired in that role.

I will continue to utilize the practices and habits that I learned from this experience to continue to make art that is meaningful to me. I would like to apply those processes to the exploration of new and varied materials. I will take those learned skills and ideas to the classroom for the benefit of my students. This will help me to improve on my curriculum to create the best curriculum for my students, my school, and my community. This experience will impact the quality of my art program and therefore my personal life as I will feel more fulfilled by the work I do knowing that I am offering my best work.

I intend to continue to work on my own art in the same manner that I worked during this project. I hope to continue to work in clay and put energy toward taking that future work out in to the public realm by participating in either another group show or a show of my own.

Importance of This Work Within the Field of Art Education

This examination of the individual’ creative processes is important to the area of arts education for it is informative of creative processes, student dispositions, teacher dispositions, and relevance of the arts to culture/society. It puts the teacher in the position of the student and therefore allows the teacher to experience the challenges and blocks that the student may experience. This process gave me first
hand experience with what works to help the individual get to a place of greater creative productivity. It helped to reveal potential student dispositions in relation to art and creativity and thereby giving me insight to more effective ways to teach.

Quality art programs are vital to our educational system. One of the aims of our schools should be to inform our students of the impact of art on society and help give those student art skills to impact society. The arts allow for innovative thinking and problem solving attitudes. Our schools need to value these dispositions in our students in order to contribute to society as a whole. This project helped to inform me of my part in that system and how to be more effective in that role.
REFERENCES


