

FieldNotes

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Nurturing Young People's Creativity

In his best-selling book, *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*, author Daniel Pink writes: "The future belongs to a very different kind of person with a different kind of mind—creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers, and meaning makers. These people—artists, inventors, designers, storytellers...—will reap society's richest rewards and share its greatest joys."

The question is: are today's youth developing the creative capacity they need to succeed in a fast-changing world? Creativity is credited with giving workers a competitive edge; yet arts-based education is under-funded and under-valued. Creativity also lies at the heart of efforts to solve many of the problems facing the planet, from poverty to environmental degradation to disease prevention. Still, many of today's youth lack opportunities to develop their creative gifts.

What role can youth development programs play in nurturing young people's creativity? Captured here are the experiences of youth-serving organizations in Canada, the Czech Republic, Peru, Turkey, and the United States. Each is engaged in a global youth development initiative of the International Youth Foundation (IYF) and Nokia. All are actively cultivating young people's creativity and self-expression—through writing, painting, graffiti, dance, filmmaking, and more.

The benefits of creative self-expression are many—from increasing young people's problem-solving ability to stimulating their community involvement; from fostering teamwork to strengthening self-confidence. Creativity also contributes to society at large—fostering new approaches to solving old problems.

TEN REASONS WHY CREATIVITY MATTERS

1. By expressing themselves creatively—through film, drama, art exhibitions—young people raise awareness of issues that are relevant to them and society as a whole.
2. Creative self-expression boosts young people's self-confidence and enthusiasm for taking on new challenges. Youth engaged in non-formal, arts-based programs have been found to demonstrate greater interest in learning within formal settings.
3. Inherent in the act of creating is making mistakes and trying again. When pursued in a nurturing environment, creativity encourages persistence.
4. Through exercising their creativity, young people develop valuable life skills (e.g., critical thinking, effective communication, problem solving, responsibility, and teamwork).
5. Programs that incorporate creativity appeal to young people's imagination and sense of play, thereby attracting their active participation.
6. Creativity and innovation are increasingly considered invaluable in securing jobs and livelihoods in today's competitive and fast-changing marketplace.
7. Through organizing arts activities (e.g., mural and graffiti painting, theatre performances), young people engage their peers in activities that are both fun and contribute to their communities.
8. Creativity begins with an intention and making that intention real. Creative exercises empower young people with the notion that they can translate their goals into tangible reality.
9. Creativity requires being expansive in one's thinking. Creativity relates, not only to producing works of art, but applies to relationships and how individuals view their lives—as predictable or full of possibility.
10. Exploring creativity—and what brings us joy in life—holds a key to living a fulfilling life.

The Allure of Creativity

One of the greatest advantages of arts-based approaches is sparking young people's active involvement in youth-serving programs. "The arts are engaging," affirms Lisa Schmidt, senior program director of Big Thought, a leading arts and cultural learning organization in the United States. "There's no right or

wrong answer so students feel freer in expressing themselves," she says. "They are more emotive and take greater risks."

Since 2004, Big Thought has implemented Make a Connection Thru Art. The program targets middle school students who learn from visiting artists how to express their creativity through painting, sculpting, writing, and spoken-word performances. Those teachers who participate in the program, which is integrated within formal school classes, learn new approaches for engaging their students. "The teachers we work with are seeing their students in a different way. They've picked up new techniques," says Schmidt. "They're able to interact with students in a non test-driven environment."

Creativity can be especially useful in attracting the interest of youth living in at-risk environments, says Regina Aguirre, program director at the Centro de Información y Educación para la Prevención del Abuso de Drogas (CEDRO) in Peru. Since 2003, CEDRO has developed the leadership skills of disadvantaged youth through the *De Calle a Calle* program, which provides young leaders with training and support to engage their peers in volunteer activities.

"Even if your program deals with education or employment training, if you don't incorporate creativity, you risk having youth drop out," says Aguirre. Most disadvantaged youth have not been exposed to proper study habits, she adds. "Creativity encourages them to apply themselves."

Creativity also inspires and motivates youth volunteerism. In the Czech Republic, over a third of youth-led volunteer projects supported by the Make a Connection – *Připoj Se* program incorporate artistic and cultural elements—from teaching children how to paint to hosting art exhibitions and theatre workshops. Since 2002, the Nokia-funded program has provided more than 3,500 young people with training and financial support to contribute to their communities.

"Today's generation of youth are looking for opportunities to express themselves," says Michaela Neumannová, program manager at the Civil Society Development Foundation, which implements *Připoj Se*. "In the past under communism, you couldn't do what you wanted," she explains. "Today's youth need to learn and have fun while helping others."

Volunteer projects that incorporate cultural activities have the added benefit of preventing negative behaviors. A youth group in the town of Litoměřice, for example, received a *Připoj Se* grant of US\$2,300 to teach electronic music workshops to their peers. On Wednesday nights, workshop participants, ages 16 to 30, meet at a local culture

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—Regina Aguirre, Program Director, Centro de Información y Educación para la Prevención del Abuso de Drogas, Peru

club to learn the art of mixing their own music, ranging from hip hop to jazz. At the same time, they learn about the negative effects of alcohol and drug use. “Many young people fill their time with drugs or hanging out on the street,” says Martin Černý, the project’s leader. “We give them positive ways to spend their time.”

Building Key Life Skills

Programs that develop young people’s creativity and self-expression can be effective in strengthening other key life skills, including critical thinking, problem solving, communication, respect, and teamwork. According to IYF partners, one of the greatest benefits of such programs is nurturing young people’s self-confidence. Young people gain confidence through doing what they love, whether its dance, theatre, or graffiti, emphasizes CEDRO’s Aguirre. “Excelling in their creative pursuits helps young people gain the confidence they need to pursue other goals,” she adds.

Craig Goodwill, a filmmaker and executive producer to the Directors of Change program in Canada, agrees. “When you’re able to express yourself meaningfully it allows you to apply your confidence in other ways,” he says. Through Directors of Change, a program of Free the Children, Canadian high school students travel to a developing country to volunteer and explore critical global issues. With the help of an experienced filmmaker, participants produce a short documentary that is then shared with their North American peers. Each film is accompanied by a resource guide, which enables teachers to focus classroom discussions and inspire action among students.

Directors of Change cultivates five core life skills—creative thinking, empathy, critical thinking, communication, and contribution—that young people need to take social action. “At the end of the day, you hold in your hand the power to communicate a message,” says Goodwill. “It takes critical thinking to decide what that message should be.” As they learn the art of filmmaking, program participants learn to plan ahead what they want to shoot and to analyze the potential impact of their work on their audience. By engaging in the lives of others, they become aware of their own pre-conceived notions.

■ Through the Dreams Workshop in Turkey, (right) young volunteers teach disadvantaged children the joys of art.



■ Youth in the Czech Republic lead electronic music workshops (left).



In Turkey, the Dreams Workshop trains youth to serve as volunteer teachers, who engage disadvantaged children in a range of artistic activities. Implemented by the Educational Volunteers Foundation of Turkey (TEGV), the program has reached more than 57,000 children and youth since 2003. “Creativity is the most important life skill when it comes to solving problems in any profession, as well as dealing with situations in daily life,” says Fatma Aksu, TEGV program coordinator. According to a 2006 outcome measurement study, 68 percent of respondents indicated that the Dreams Workshop had given them the skills to deal with difficult situations. Ninety percent said they would do more voluntary work and provide more leadership as a result of their program experience.

TRAINING DISADVANTAGED YOUTH IN ART AND BUSINESS SKILLS

The sign outside reads “Starting Artists: Get Inspired. Get Creative. Get to work!” On weekday afternoons, dozens of underprivileged youth, ages 13 to 18, flock to this converted storefront building in the heart of Brooklyn, New York to express their creativity while gaining business skills.

Here, young photographers learn about composition and lighting, aspiring graphic designers acquire computer skills, and silkscreen artists hone their craft. Each receives instruction and support from professional artists and business volunteers on how to turn a creative gift into a marketable skill or micro-enterprise.

Starting Artists is the brainchild of Marisa Catalina Casey, age 28, who recognizes that in today’s world, creativity and innovation hold a key to success in work—and life.

“Businesses seek to hire the most innovative workers, making arts education essential to landing the most competitive jobs,” says Marisa, who, at the same time, points to dramatic cuts in the arts budgets of New York City public schools. “Without structured opportunities to explore the arts and business, low-income youth can’t earn the cultural capital vital to class mobility,” she says.

Over the next five years, Marisa seeks to expand Starting Artists to reach 200 students and to incubate at least five student-run, arts-based enterprises.

Marisa was recognized by the International Youth Foundation and Nokia as a 2008 YouthActionNet® Global Fellow.

Awareness-raising Through Art

Arts-based programs not only benefit those young people who participate, but their peers, parents, and community members who attend performances, watch films, and behold exhibitions of youth-produced art.

In Peru, *De Calle a Calle* participants resurrected the art of folkloric dance, which they perform at schools and public venues. “Connecting to the past, to your roots, and your cultural identity is especially important for youth growing up in big cities,” says Aguirre. Theatre has emerged as an equally potent vehicle for program participants to express themselves. Youth in the La Planeta community of Lima formed a theatre troupe which produced a play that explores issues related to drug abuse, gangs, teen pregnancy, and family violence—all from a youth perspective. “In the play, they’re demonstrating the application of life skills in responding to these problems,” Aguirre adds.

In Canada, Directors of Change utilized filmmaking in its approach, in part, to scale up the program’s impact. While only 14 to 16 youth are engaged in producing video material each year, the films are shown to thousands of high school students as part of their formal class work. The films are also shown at public screenings and film festivals.

In Turkey, the Dreams Workshop excels at gaining public exposure for its children’s artwork. In 2006, TEGV collaborated with municipal authorities in showcasing a traveling exhibition of participants’ artwork within the nation’s underground transit system. Entitled “Me in 2020,” the exhibit portrayed how the young artists saw themselves in the future and how they intended to achieve their dreams. In 2008, the Dreams Workshop held another exhibition, “Recycling Dreams,” at the national airport in Istanbul. The artwork reflected messages related to recycling, consumption, and personal responsibility. Both exhibits were widely covered in the local and national news media.

LESSONS LEARNED

IYF partners cite the following “lessons learned” in developing young people’s creativity and self-expression:

- *It’s important to create safe spaces where young people can pursue their creativity without feeling judged or criticized.* Arts-oriented programs need to foster an environment where youth feel comfortable taking risks and thinking outside the box.
- *Young people should be given the chance to experiment with diverse mediums in order to decide—for themselves—which to pursue.* The Dreams Workshop in Turkey offers children the chance to explore various forms of painting, ceramics, and sculpture.
- *It’s critical to work with teachers/instructors who are not only gifted in the arts, but are able to relate to children and bring the world of art to life.* “The role of teachers/volunteers is critical,” says TEGV’s Aksu. “How they teach and their attitude is vital to improving skills.” Also important is training instructors in the development of life skills through arts-based activities.
- *Working within the formal education system can pose challenges.* Making the case for arts education in schools can be difficult in today’s environment, says Big Thought’s Schmidt. Sometimes it makes more sense to work outside the formal education system (e.g., with parents groups or through after-school programs).

Additional Resources

Publications

- Csikszentmihályi, Mihaly. *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*. New York: Harper Perennial, ©1996.
- Hahn, Andrew; Lanspery, Susan; Leavitt, Tom. *Measuring Outcomes in Programs Designed to Help Young People Acquire Life Skills: Lessons from the Nokia-IYF Global Youth Development Initiative*. Brandeis University Center for Youth and Communities, ©2006
- Pink, Daniel H. *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*. New York: Penguin Group, ©2006

Websites

- Big Thought, www.bigthought.org
- Civil Society Development Foundation, www.nros.cz; www.připojse.cz
- Directors of Change, <http://doc.freethechildren.com>
- Educational Volunteers Foundation of Turkey, www.tegv.org/en
- Information and Education Center for the Prevention of Drug Abuse, www.cedro.org.pe
- Make a Connection Thru Art, www.makeaconnectionthruart.org
- Starting Artists, www.startingartists.org

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