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Creativity Facilitated by Group Work Group Features as Essentials for the Development of a Creative Attitude

Jürgen Kalcher and Otto Lüdemann

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Copyright © 2007 and 2011 by: Professor Jürgen Kalcher, Sthamerstr. 67, D-22397 Hamburg; E-Mail: [K.Alcher\[at-symbol\]gmx.de](mailto:K.Alcher[at-symbol]gmx.de), und Professor Dr. Otto Lüdemann, Sportzenkoppel 21, D-22359 Hamburg, E-Mail: [otto.luedemann\[at-symbol\]googlemail.com](mailto:otto.luedemann[at-symbol]googlemail.com).

1. Creativity Understood as an Individual Competency

When speaking of „creativity“, most experts have usually something like the following definition in mind where

„creativity is seen as man’s capacity to produce new ideas, insights, inventions or artistic objects, which are accepted as being of social, spiritual, aesthetic, scientific or technological value. This emphasizes novelty and originality in the production of new combinations of familiar patterns, as in poetry or music, or reorganisation of concepts and theories in the sciences. But unconventionality is not sufficient: A lunatic’s ravings are not creative. The product must be recognised by capable people. Even if initially rejected and not appreciated until later.“¹

It is herein clearly understood as an individual ability or talent, also understood as one of many human „competencies“, with which human beings are more or less gifted--some, like artists and inventors--more, others--like you and me and especially „marginal“ personalities--less: It might be undecided whether or not and to

¹ See: Harré and Lamb [Eds.]: *The Encyclopedic Dictionary of Psychology*, p. 123.

what degree this human capacity results from heritage or from learning, but very rarely „creativity“ has been reconceived under the aspect of the social group.

2. Competency versus Attitude

As opposed to this individualist perception of „creativity“ Erich Fromm accentuates from his social psychological point of view that creativity in his sense „...does not refer to a quality which particularly gifted persons or artists could achieve, but to an attitude which every human being should and can achieve“.²

In his article he elaborates something completely different proposing a diverse mental construct by understanding creativity as an attitude instead of a personality trait. This means an essential difference as far as the following features are concerned.

An attitude is in any case an acquired behavioural disposition. That means that it is taken from the environment by learning processes based on past experiences. It is a disposition to follow a certain behavioural pattern, a readiness to think, feel and act in a certain way, and by this it is a much broader

² Fromm, Erich: „The Creative Attitude,“ in: H. A. Anderson [Ed.]: *Creativity and its Cultivation*, New York 1959, p. 54.



concept, more flexible and at the same time more vague than a single „competency“. It is much more of a holistic understanding dependent on process and development than the clear cut psychological construct called personality trait or individual competency. It is therefore open to new experience and education.

fullest amount. In Fromm’s terms the „biophile“ way of being in and responding to the world.

3. Erich Fromm’s Vision of a „Creative Attitude“

In his article „The Creative Attitude“ Fromm spreads out before our eyes what this means as far as creativity is concerned. Starting from the general formulation „...creativity is the ability to see (or to be aware) and to respond“ he paints a picture of his understanding of creativity using catchy examples of experiencing things and persons in a creative way. A truly creative attitude would make it possible to perceive things and persons in their „suchness“ and not only from their abstraction. In the latter case the perceiver would see for instance a tree from his „conceptual knowledge (...) only as an example of the genus ‘tree’ (...) only as a representative of an abstraction“, whereas „in full awareness there is no abstraction; the tree retains its full concreteness, and that means also its uniqueness (...) and seeing this tree I relate myself, I see it, I respond to it.“³

Not only is the way of „seeing“ a special one in Fromm’s understanding, but it also has serious consequences for relating myself to other human beings as well as for relating to myself. „To see the other person creatively means to see him objectively, that is, without projections and without distortions, and this means overcoming in oneself those neurotic ‘vices’ which necessarily lead to projections and distortions (...) only if one has reached a degree of inner maturity which reduces projection and distortion to a minimum can one experience creatively.“⁴ Consequently only a creative perceiver is able to respond to things and persons truly creatively and is in a very special way related to them--experiencing life to its

³ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 44-54.

⁴ Fromm, *l.c.*, p. 46.



4. Conditions for Creativity

To acquire and to carry forward this „creative attitude“ Fromm sets the following preconditions:

- the capacity to be puzzled
- the ability to concentrate
- self-experience as relatedness
- the ability to accept conflict and tension resulting from polarity
- the willingness to be born every day

Without a question these are high expectations of an average person. But aren't they at the same time worthwhile goals of education towards a world attractive to live in? And, they are in fact conditions with an enormous social impact or even social by their very nature like relatedness, accentuated by Fromm as, maybe, the most important feature in all his thinking and writing. To be „passionately related“ to the world is one of the foremost postulates permeating his philosophy and his understanding of what he calls a creative attitude. So, he finishes his thoughts on creativity in the article mentioned so far by pointing out his conviction that education for creativity is being equivalent with educating for life.

By studying in detail the above conditions of becoming a creative personality it becomes very clear that being able to think and act creatively cannot emerge from a gifted individual alone living in splendid isolation as a result of his or her endowment, but needs the social „climate“ to be reinforced by others, who estimate and therefore further this valuable attitude. Fromm's perspective suggests to examine these social determinants of creativity which has been studied much more intensively under the aspect of differential psychology.

5. The Group - A Location for Social and Individual Development

So, acquiring an attitude like this is a lifelong task and depends strongly on a social field that can provide the necessary preconditions. Fromm points out that developing and experiencing a creative self can come into existence „...only in

the process of my relatedness to others... If I am isolated and unrelated, I am so full of anxiety that I cannot possibly have a sense of identity and of self.“⁵ Therefore others are needed to fully evolve my individual potentials including a creative attitude.

All human beings are living in the presence of other human beings. Nobody can really survive in social isolation. Education and social work therefore instrumentalized groups as a tool to advance human development and growth. Especially in „social group work“ as a method of professional social work, group properties have been elaborated in detail in order to apply this knowledge for social work purposes. As their number is legion we are going to focus on one American textbook, written by one of the most outstanding representatives of university teachers in social group work, Lawrence Shulman, who refers to the following group features understanding the group as a „mutual aid system“⁶, in order to open up group work knowledge for the purposes of advancing creativity as a social attitude. I believe that this knowledge can support our teachers of disadvantaged young men and women.

Shulman is summing up what actually offers a broad spectrum of inter personal conditions for human growth and development, which are the indispensable concomitants of the development of what Fromm calls „creative attitude“: „Sharing data, the dialectical process, discussing taboo areas, the all-in-the-same-boat phenomenon, developing a universal perspective, mutual support, mutual demand, individual problem solving, rehearsal, and the strength-in-numbers phenomenon...“⁷

6. „Teaching“ Creativity?

Filografia is aiming at young people characterized as „being without thirst for knowledge and education“ to transcribe the actual target group of the project. Perhaps in

⁵ Fromm, *ibid.*, p. 49.

⁶ Lawrence Shulman: *The Skills of Helping Individuals, Families and Groups*, 3rd edition, Itasca 1997, pp. 274-282.

⁷ *Ibid.*



this description one important aspect is overlooked, namely that the reasons for this might be manifold. Very often however, there might be frustrations resulting from early learning experiences, social marginalisation or diverse other handicaps play an important part in their staying apart from or even refusing regular educational programs and offers.

It will therefore be difficult to try to reach out for this population applying those average educational means and methods which have been applied to them again and again, however without success. In the contrary, the selection of didactical approaches has to be „creative“ itself. Taking Fromm’s perspective of a creative attitude we may recognise that the choice of adequate methods to reach this population can only come from educators drawing their methods from their own creative attitude.

At the same time we have to take into account that the educational goal also is creativity or rather the achievement of a creative attitude. The task therefore is, to achieve young people’s creative attitude by creative methods applied by educators acting themselves as fundamentally creative persons.

To see, to be aware and respond--in order to do this in the full sense of Fromm’s definition it is inevitable to rely on the educational power of a group. The most important prerequisite for an attainment of that creative attitude is in Fromm’s philosophy „self-experience as relatedness“. And being related to other human beings can only be provided in groups. Also the other requirement, „The ability to accept conflict and tension resulting from polarity“ can only be facilitated in and through groups. It needs a social situation to realize these postulates. And also the other personality traits mentioned by Fromm cannot be realised outside a social situation.

7. What are the treasures of a group?

A critic of this would ask: What is so special with „the group“? Aren’t groups ubiquitary in every day life?--Yes, they are, but only the expert would be able to actually use the group dimension for educational purposes. Social work

developed a methodology called „social group work“ which is also the theoretical background of the authors. Even school teachers, who generally work in groups (classes) are very often not really aware of the possibilities inherent in their classes. To see the school class as a group would sometimes help enormously to improve their teaching.

One of the features in modern group work theory is the role of the worker. No longer is he or she the central person in a class but he’s the one who has to take care that the group process will develop and continue to go in a positive direction. Moreover the internal power of the group has to be developed and controlled so that group workers in the first line „trust the process“ more than their own tricky concept of teaching towards a certain outcome. If this is ensured change and development of the group, members will be brought about by themselves. The „mutual aid system“ is the most agreed on approach in professional group work. Shulman’s categories mentioned above can be used as the treasures which can be „mined“ like the gold of their social life in a mutual aid system.

Taking Shulman’s doorways of group potential we can easily exemplify their usefulness in creating a creative group climate on which foundation a creative attitude is very probable to develop in the group members.

So sharing personal data may be an increasing means to develop mutual trust among group members otherwise often characterised by mistrusting one another. To use the dialectical process in a group can help the members to deeply understand that the world is full of contradicting and incongruous opinions and facts, different cultures and different language can be tolerated, if the overall group climate allows it. Then taboo areas can be touched and opened up and by this can social norms be changed. In a group setting it is more and more understood and experienced that all the members are like a crew in the same boat. They experience that what happens to one of them will inflict each member. A sense of solidarity can develop and a universal perspective of life, a political perspective, may be implanted once for ever. What Shulman calls „the strength-in-number phenomenon“ is also an outcome of



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becoming aware that it is not always me, who has to win or lose and who must never ever lose his face, but that we are strong because we are related to each other and we are a big number. Not only mutual support can be experienced and enjoyed, but also the enormous power of mutual demand can be learned under the conditions of a well functioning group. New behaviour may be tested out in the safe space of the group. It can be the platform of a rehearsal

for risking behavioural patterns never tried. And the group can also be a place that provides effective assistance in individual problem solving. If the group concomitant to the learned facilitation of the group worker develops this mutual aid system, the outcome is what we would call with Erich Fromm a creative attitude permeating the lives of each and all group members taking part in this experience.