Creativity in Social Work Practice

Tom Walz PhD & Mika Uematsu MFA

Creativity in Social Work Practice:
A Pedagogy

Tom Walz
Mika Uematsu

ABSTRACT. This paper addresses the need for creativity in social work education and social work practice. Emphasis is placed on a creative infrastructure in education rather than conventional teaching. The authors offer a pedagogy that attempts to encourage the creative process in students so that they may apply such creative skills as practitioners. Furthermore, the authors give a working example of how a social work department can integrate creativity into a structured educational environment. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: getinfo@haworth.com]*

Creative courage . . . is the discovering of new forms, new symbols, new patterns on which a new society can be built. Every profession can and does require some creative courage.

—Rollo May, 1975

INTRODUCTION

Creativity in social work practice is a necessity. Siporin (1988) states "social work practice is an art form that utilizes original and creative

Tom Walz, PhD, is Professor and the former Director of the School of Social Work at the University of Iowa, 321 North Hall, Iowa City, IA 52245. Mika Uematsu is a MFA graduate from the Nonfiction Writing Program at the University of Iowa.

activities to help clients lead full and productive lives." Within that art form is the employment of many innovative and creative procedures and techniques expressive of the inherent artistic and aesthetic dimensions of social work practice.

In this paper the authors argue the importance and essentialness of creativity in social work practice. This is followed by an exploration of the nature of creativity and the creative process. The paper concludes with a discussion of a pedagogy for creativity in the education of social workers.

RATIONALE FOR CREATIVE PRACTICE

In providing a rationale for the necessity of a creative approach to social work practice, we offer the following four arguments: (1) *unique-ness of the human being*, (2) *cultural diversity*, (3) *overcoming boredom*, and (4) *resource limits*.

1. Uniqueness of the Human Being

Social work is frequently referred to as a "human service for obvious reasons." It is a people profession which operates within a variety of theoretical framework(s) of personality and behavior. The principle of the individualization of the client derives from the profession's time-honored belief that people are unique (Sullivan et al., 1994).

Experience suggests how facile and changeable the moods of individuals and their social circumstances are in practice. A person's feelings and situations can and do change rapidly. Successful practitioners are those able to identify such changes and adapt their practices accordingly. The entire plane of bio-psycho-social functioning of individuals rests in an unsteady state. Chaos defines the human condition more accurately than order (Halle, 1977).

Whatever the current practice theory or field of practice, social workers must account for the reality of these individual differences. No formulae has yet been devised that can totally guide a worker through the unpredict-ability of the human response. It is this variability in human behavior that forces social workers to explore and design creative approaches to prac-tice.

2. Cultural Diversity

One way human variability is shaped and expressed is by and through culture. Nowhere is cultural diversity of peoples any greater than in the

United States (McLennan, 1995). Social work practice intervention, albeit micro or macro, must continuously make adjustments to accommodate the diversity factor in those we serve. Race, gender, ethnic origin, religion, sexual orientation, occupational roles, and educational backgrounds are all factors through which client communication and behavior is filtered.

The ability to understand and respond to a variety of cultural languages and behaviors requires a practitioner open to diverse experiences and cultural nuances. The cultural framework of our clients, like that of our own, is governed by the forces and nature of social change. A culturally sensitive practice will follow an open theory which acknowledges diversity as a powerful independent variable in human behavior. From our perspective, we will try to define and describe a culturally sensitive practice as a creative practice theory approach.

3. Beating Boredom

Much has been researched and written on the phenomenon of boredom and burnout in both clinical and indirect practice (Cherniss, 1980). The concern about burnout has become a prominent feature, especially now that paper work in the service professions has increased, while staff resources have been pruned.

It would seem logical to assume that highly orthodox practitioners who rigidly follow a particular model of practice would be at a greater risk for the effects of boredom than one who follows a more open and varied practice portfolio. In our view, the creative clinician is someone who can draw upon metaphor, humor, anecdote, story, etc., in practice, while employing techniques like eco-mapping, genograms, meditative practices, and similar communications and problem-solving tools. Family intervention theories like strategic, structural, systemic, and psychoanalytic are all assumed to be helpful. A similar list of comparable theories and techniques relevant to the macro practitioner could also be outlined.

Creative social work practice then is not just theory driven practice, but multi-theory driven practice. This observation, however, is not to be taken simply as the pursuit of eclecticism, but a deliberate approach in which the practitioner chooses to follow a combination of preferred models. What is envisioned in a creative social work practice is an approach in which the problem, the problem situation, and the persons affected by the problem define the nature of the problem-solving interventions. Some change in one or more of these three components should immediately institute some change in worker interventions. Situations where a client episode is auto-

matically fitted to a single preferred theoretical framework or method of intervention is to be avoided.

4. Resource Limits

A final argument for a creative approach to practice is the declining resource base within which social workers must practice. For more than two decades cost containment has been a characteristic of the social welfare world. Despite the rising needs and demands for social welfare services, the resources available for addressing these demands have not kept pace. The condition of austerity in social welfare is unlikely to change in the immediate future.

Fortunately, declining social welfare resources do not always limit what workers are able to do for or with their clients. The cost of creative problem-solving is no greater than any other alternative approaches, except perhaps for the investment of worker time and energy. More than any other resource, creative work requires energy and commitment, while repetitive interventions require little energy and can lead to a lazy kind of orthodoxy in practice.

Many workers have operated from the premise that the solution to a client's problem rests within the client (Zastrow, 1985). Listening more than doing is perhaps the more critical skill for the practitioner. There is no sur-charge for listening well–though admittedly there would be no listening if there were no listeners. Even a creative approach to practice requires some resources. Yet a creative social worker should in truth be able to do more with less. Creativity is the difference.

UNDERSTANDING CREATIVITY

Creativity is an illusive concept. It is a term used to describe a process that unfortunately is not easily describable. There is no formula for producing creative outcomes or assuring creative behaviors in any field. Yet, as with all human endeavors, if we observe the phenomenon long enough, some reasonable generalizations can be made.

In North American culture, creative persons are perceived both as desirable and dangerous. We admire the so-called creative geniuses, but at the same time consider them not quite normal. In social work, it is much the same. We speak in positive terms about creative practice but manage to limit its application. Our practice is dominated by bureaucratic prescriptions and heavily supervised interventions.

Having made the case for the importance of creative social work practice, it is necessary to explore what is known about creativity and in what ways it has been promoted through a pedagogy.

DEFINITION

Creativity is defined by Webster's, not very creatively, as the "act of creating something new." Creativity is the ability to produce something original, something that, heretofore, did not exist. Novelty is only one property of creativity. Creativity must also meet the criteria of purposefulness, and it must provide some new standards for measuring outcomes, and it must offer some new twists that actually improve on the old or previous ways of doing things. Thus, creativity is more than doing something different. The differences must enhance the world in some way.

PRODUCT, PROCESS, PERCEPTION

Creativity as novelty or originality may be either product, process, or perception. A creative act might result in a new "thing"--a piece of art, a musical score, or a new mousetrap. It might also be a new way of doing something, such as discovering a short cut in executing a math problem, inventing a new exercise, or revising a management information system. Creativity might even be a new way of viewing or suggesting something, thus it might even introduce a new metaphor.

In social work, introducing metaphors like "ecology" or "systems" would be examples. Gareth Morgan (1989) recently wrote an innovative book in which he uses metaphors to better understand the workings of organization. Common to each of the above, however, is the "creation" of a new way of seeing or doing something that makes a positive contribution or improvement over some old way of doing or seeing things. How, than, is this inventiveness promoted or developed in an individual? What is the social psychology of creativity? Is there not also a political economy of creativity?

CREATIVITY AND THE FINE ARTS

For perhaps obvious reasons, creativity has been associated with the creative arts--the fine arts, the literary arts, and the creative arts. It is

assumed that "artists" are better trained and have deeper commitments to the creative process than others. At the opposite extreme are the petty "bureaucrats," the lock step followers who prefer the world of sameness, predictability, and convenient replication. The ratio of artists to bureaucrats could perhaps be used to measure the level of the creative contextuality of a particular culture. Unfortunately, in our culture, the ratio would probably favor the petty bureaucrat.

Clearly, not all artists are creative. Pedestrianism is as common in art as petty bureaucracy is in government. Nonetheless, the artist and the arts afford a useful arena for learning about becoming a creative person. In the creative arts, creativity is often, but not always, rewarded. Too much originality is threatening in the arts as in other arenas. A true creative artist may be laughed at long before he or she is lauded; nonetheless, in the arts, respect and recognition of one's inventiveness is generally forthcoming.

A second dimension of creative arts is the blending of individuality and uniqueness with artistic expression. In music, a good example is jazz. The musician feels his or her way through a musical expression that is unmarked; sound is keyed off previous sound, while the creator maintains a sense of integrity over the wholeness of the expression. No two renditions of the same music will be the same in true jazz. The score cannot be copied; it is written as it is being played. Only the musical pattern may be noted.

Depending on the art form, the artist may experiment with either product, process, or perception or multiples of each. There is no confinement of expression, except that which is self-imposed or culturally enforced. All boundaries in the arts are as widespread as possible.

If we accept, as argued earlier, that social work is art as well as science, the practitioner and the profession could do well to think of social work as a "creative act" or art (Sheafor et al., 1991). Many practitioners and educators have worked in the cross-over areas of social work and the arts: music, art, and dance therapies. Most would agree there exists a natural affinity between the two. The visceral, expressive component of human problem-solving is clear to those who practice out of such a framework. Our own experience with the development and administration of the National Creative Writing Program for Social Workers evinces this relationship. The ability for creative expression adds a special dimension to what we are about as social workers.

KNOWLEDGE, EXPERIENCE, AND INTUITION

Inventiveness seems to be a peculiar human capacity in the animal kingdom. Smaller brain species seem capable of adapting genetically to

changed conditions, but none seem capable of rapid behavioral change true to humans. Obviously, the brain, or our cognitive abilities, figured keenly in creativity. In the more linear aspects of our culture in which rationality and predictably are revered, we place greater attention and demand on right brain activity. After all, the creative individual is usually heavily dependent upon having a large reservoir of knowledge and experience. The ability to imagine alternatives and new ways, however, can only come from a mind rich in ideas. It is hard for a novelist to write about far away places without having visited some far away place and it is hard for a science fiction writer to imagine the world of the future without understanding science.

Yet, we know neither knowledge nor experience "doth a creative person make." How we draw upon what is in our cognitive treasure chest is the determinant. Enter the left brain, the home for our intuitive and affective knowing capabilities. Obviously, intuition is not going to work well in people who are empty vessels. Intuition is going to work best in people with rich, varied experiences and a solid knowledge base. Intuition simply means that some people are able to pick up "cues" faster than others, see relationships between complex and disparate things more easily, and move more readily to the essence or truth of something. In social work terms, an example of intuition at work is "clinical or practice wisdom." It is the ability to get to the heart of the matter without necessarily going through all the tedious steps of rational analysis, testing, and evaluation.

It is critical to recognize the duality of cognitive and expressive components in creativity–knowledge/experience and intuitiveness and the paradox that they present. To know and to experience often means that alternative ways of envisioning reality are obstructed. For the bureaucrat, the power that comes from the knowledge of set ways of doing things is entrapping. Change becomes a threat to power. Intuition, on the other hand, is viewing things differently, in effect creating change. Change, however, is always change from something to something else. Without a current baseline, change is hard to measure.

Our creative potential would be better developed if we as a culture had greater respect for intuition. However, the positivist philosophy of science that we have followed in our modern epistemology has limited knowledge building to the scientific method. The limitations of this philosophy and practice have been well articulated in the post-modernists' critiques (Weinberg, 1960). Intuitive behaviors are likely to flourish only in cultures where intuition itself is respected and rewarded. The literary person and the fine artist are more likely to be creative because their sub-cultures

expect them to be creative, and reward them for being so, than appears to be true in many of the service professions.

Whether or not we live in a creative culture at the moment is at best puzzling. We are surrounded by novelty in literature and the arts. Both commercially and technologically, we have a remarkable record of material innovation. The American market is flooded with novel goods and services. Yet, overall we seem to be institutionally rigid and bureaucratic. It is an established fact that children are most creative before they enter school than the immediate years after they begin their formal education (Smith, 1990). Professional education seems to be governed by orthodoxy and educational correctness. Innovation is often permitted only with the permission of accrediting bodies. This seems to be no less true in Social Work than in other professions.

Research on creativity suggests some correlation between being creative and having a certain personality type (Melrose, 1989). Creative people seem to be ones, who in addition to basic brightness, are open and playful individuals. They are people who warm to the idea of being different or acting different. They are people for whom the status quo produces some unease. They pursue change often simply for the sake of change. They love giving expression to their human need for individuality and idiosyncracy. They enjoy stretching their imaginations to find a fresh way of doing things and often are driven to introducing their insights. There may be some hidden creative people, but most prefer being performers.

The creative approach and the intuitive response are certainly not short cuts to learning. It is not, as some charge, a lazy person's approach to learning. On the contrary, creativity is extremely hard work, much harder than conventional modes of responding to situations. The reason it is so difficult is because creativity requires, as we suggested earlier, substantial scholarship, a broad experience, energy, ego, and the courage to go against the status quo and accept the costs of doing so. Creativity requires courageous persons to appreciate and direct . . . change (May, 1975).

As mentioned, the creative person is one who is open to experience. That openness may involve experiences within as well as without oneself. A fearful person may shut off many important interior messages and thus refrain from pursuing certain questions or undertaking worldly adventures. Or the person may lack the will to risk or the energy to venture. In maintaining their carefully bounded existence, they will inevitably limit the range and volume of ideas, concepts, and metaphors that they would need to draw upon as a creative problem-solver/artist.

In contrast, the creative person typically has been an adventurer and a risk-taker. Such persons move readily into the unknown, confident that

they can get back again. They are comfortable when not always in control. They do not need the familiar to feel safe. Creative persons tend to develop certain habits in their thinking. Many have knee jerk reactions to the status quo. Their identity requires challenging what is and pursuing alternatives. They approach life as a null hypothesis. Many will even reject their own inventions wanting to move on and beyond.

The creative person is also someone who tends to speak, think, and respond to metaphor, analysis, and concept. They are practical philosophers, people who see things broadly and narrowly at the same time. Again, it is apparent that metaphor and analysis come from people with a breadth, rather than narrowness of knowledge.

It may be debatable whether the specialist or the generalist would be better prepared for creativity. In both, knowledge and experience are present, but it is a different sort of knowledge and experience. Our position holds that the generalist is better prepared for creative expression because of the enhanced possibilities to borrow and cross over the fund of general knowledge held.

Creative persons are rarely solitary individuals, despite the mythology which presents the image of the lonely creative scientist esconsed in his or her laboratory. Since creativity feeds off reality and the ideas/efforts of others, creativity is inherently a social process. Brainstorming is a popular expression in which the knowledge base and intuitive capacity of an individual are broadened through linking up with the cognitive powers of others. It is also a sociable act in that the experience-gathering is a social act. On the other hand, it is not so sociable that one is distracted from observing, recording, analyzing, and working on alternative solutions. Reflection, meditation, and private study are all conditions for enhancing creative ability.

What is or is not creative can be controversial. If one of the criteria of creativity is improving upon the old, that can very much be a matter of unresolvable debate. One can help a client make a major change in their life as a social worker, but whether this will necessarily improve their quality of life over the long haul is clearly uncertain. Creatively solving a child care problem will not assure that a child will ultimately be better off. This does not mean that we are forever cast into relativity in our work, but it does mean that there are times when not making or encouraging some client change should be the cause of action, regardless of any creative alternative that might be imagined.

PEDAGOGY OF CREATIVITY

If social work is indeed a creative process, how do we prepare practitioners for creative practice? Is there an identifiable pedagogy of creativity?

Given our emphasis on the role that knowledge and experience play in creativity, where does a social work educator begin?

We suspect there is neither a beginning point nor a definable method for teaching creative practice. Rather than something to be taught, creativity is a behavior to be nurtured. Humans, after all, are by nature inventive animals. With their enlarged brains, humans transcend animal instinct and are, thus, forced into creative solutions in order to survive. Adaptation to a changing world comes only through our ability to create.

Formal teaching and learning arrangements take place in particular environments and generally follow specified conventions. In turn, these educational conventions are usually based on accepted social learning theories and the precedents set by other teacher/learner arrangements. In a pedagogy of creativity, the first step must be to challenge existing educational conventions.

The most critical educational convention to be challenged is the empty vessel approach to teaching and learning. When assisting learners to be creative, nothing is more damaging than to assume the learner to be an empty vessel which can be filled only from the teacher's font of knowledge and experience. The alternative approach is to view education as a process which is expected to tap into the learner's knowledge and experience pool when discovering new knowledge. The learner discovers truth within as well as outside oneself.

Learners, however, may indeed be running near empty. Many are quite inexperienced. Here is where the instructor must help students add to the store of what they currently possess. The key is to add to their repertoire of problem-solving information without giving solutions. Ideally, we want them to become self-directed learners.

When social work is not taught as a creative process, it is assumed that there exists a "best practice" to which the student can be indoctrinated. We have argued that there is no best practice, other than the possibility of some preferred response in particular problem situations. There are simply no formulated solutions that automatically can be applied to most situations. Each situation must be carefully thought through, weighed, and evaluated until a tailored response is reached. The danger exists in intellectual rigidity whenever a best practice begins to dominate professional education. Herman Hesse (1969) captured this danger in his novel *The Glass Bead Game (Magister Ludi)*, in which a group of monks become the guardians of a body of knowledge that can be reached only through the playing of the glass bead game. Playing the game, unfortunately, displaces the real exercise of truth-seeking–not an uncommon phenomenon in higher education today.

Building a creative learning environment in education goes beyond altering the milieu of the classroom. The presence of a creative ambiance throughout the entire school is essential. It is at this level that one finds and experiences organizational culture. The openness of the learning experience is evident in the way the school operates and how it defines its relationship to the learner. A faculty member is unlikely to take an open stance to professional education unless the greater faculty shares a commitment to the value of creativity in social work education. The openness of which we speak is the freedom and comfort to explore, challenge, and exchange ideas. An accompanying attribute is the professor's willingness to listen because of a belief that students truly have something to say.

There is probably much room for improving the creative learning environments in many schools of social work. Some faculty may not give this much priority, nor would they know what such an environment would look like. Thus, it would be beneficial to explore some working models and ideas for creative learning environments in social work.

We know, for example, that a creative educational culture is apt to look and feel more like a dance department than a business school. One would expect to find the educational environment filled with creative expression of one sort or another. One interesting example is a School of Social Work which operates a fairly large Coffeeshop run by handicapped adults. What is a sheltered workshop that serves the general public doing in the middle of a School of Social Work? After a visit to the project the answer becomes self-evident. The Coffeeshop is a creative solution to a host of concerns: it addresses the need to add some personal charm to a work place, it is a response to the need for work opportunities for physically and mentally challenged workers, it provides a place of respite for both faculty and students, and finally it provides a natural way for students to get to come to understand the challenging nature of disability.

It is evident in the example of the Coffeeshop that it achieves its purposes and what it is about is carried through the total milieu of the School. Yet, in any effort at building a creative learning environment, we need to be aware of the ever present danger of introducing a facade that simply masks education.

OPENNESS TO INQUIRY

Once a creative milieu is available and in place, what should follow for the instructor who believes social work to be a creative process? At this point it is appropriate to assess one's curriculum. What's worth knowing? What's essential for a knowledge base from which to launch creative

problem-solving? Do we feel impelled to teach only carefully sifted knowledge or may students be exposed to a broad sample of what's known in a particular area? Are only screened, orthodox concepts taught or are alternative theories and concepts also put to an educational litmus test? A common way to assure openness is to pass everything through a null hypothesis and expose the student to unothodox ideas. Nothing is more dangerous to creative development than being limited only to "politically correct" concepts and theories.

Encouragement of experience is a handmaiden to the role knowledge plays in making creative thinking possible. Experience is a form of exposure. The more wide-ranging the exposure, the broader the experience. What one learns from experience is arbitrated somewhat by what one brings to it. The greater one's openness and courage, the more likely the experience will be qualitative. With this in mind, creative teachers will develop a pedagogy that expands and enriches the base of a student's experience. Courage and depth come from sharing this experience with the instructor. An example might be comparative travel study assignments or seminars led by instructors which are designed to help students see and feel the world in fresh ways. One of the authors has annually conducted a Third World seminar to Central America for more than twenty-five years. Hundreds of students have had the opportunity to discover the realities of life in the Third World through these ventures. Students can also direct their own journeys into new experiences and are likely to do so if recognized and rewarded for their effort. Not long ago we introduced the concept of a student's self-directed learning transcript into which relevant self-chosen learning activities and time investments were recorded. Students were rewarded by having a transcript of self-directed activities in their files which faculty could use in the construction of future references. Such activities could involve attending lectures, conferences, rallies, and reading additional books. Admittedly, these transcripts are process records rather than outcome records. Nonetheless, they are felt to be a tool for encouraging self-directed learning and the broadening of experiences.

Teaching creativity is a slow and deliberate process. Learners will need time to build the knowledge and experience base needed in creative problem-solving. Along the way, however, students can benefit from creative challenges, tasks, and assignments in their classes that invite them to produce novel or original responses. Concise syllabi in schools of social work need to include some criteria for establishing a creative classroom milieu and for including creative assignments.

Helping students better understand the creative process itself is a step in

a pedagogy of creativity. There are some techniques that creative persons have used successfully. Teaching students how to employ analogy, metaphor, cross-cultural, and comparative approaches are all beneficial. For example, helping a student understand their social agency as an organization might draw on the use of organizational metaphor. Just as Gareth Morgan showed how organizational theory could be analyzed through metaphor, students can be assisted to appreciate the place of metaphor in theory-building. The same would be true of analogy, although with analogy, command of the knowledge of another domain may be necessary in order to fully exploit the use of analogy in theory building.

Social work theory development is no stranger to either the use of analogy or comparative study. The profession has borrowed extensively from neighboring fields throughout its history (Polansky, 1985). In many ways social work has been a fairly "open" field. The fact that social work plays such a dominant role in mental health attests to this. Psychiatry, on the other hand, has reduced its role by returning to a fairly narrow orthodox view of mental illness as essentially a biochemical deficit. Professional arrogance can lead certain professions to believe only the results of their own records and knowledge-building. Creative practice, however, not only encourages collateral borrowing, but encourages an even wider and broader use of analogy.

Unfortunately, much of social work education has been culture bound. As the presumed world leader in social work education and practice developments, North American social workers have not felt that they had much to learn from other nations and cultures. This has greatly reduced the comparative knowledge base that can contribute so heavily to creative thinking. Until recently, it was assumed that North American social work was wholly an export product. This is changing. Three years ago, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services added to its annual grant initiative a category for funding demonstrations of service models and ideas based on borrowing international models.

The creative instructor will teach from the assumption that there is no orthodoxy, without avoiding the orthodox. This is like the scientific use of a null hypothesis: You act as if you believe what you suspect not to be true until that belief is scientifically refuted. Most professors tend to teach accepted bodies of knowledge and popular practices. These are clearly not to be avoided, yet they are not the curriculum. They are only that part of the curriculum from which one ventures to discover more truth, greater truth, or even a different truth.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

As noted at the outset, we are dealing with unique human personalities and social institutions. There are ultimately no formulated ways to intervene within either. Every problem commands a creative solution, even though similarities in people and institutions allow for some level of generalization in problem-solving.

An understanding of creativity comes from experiencing creativity. The modeling behavior of the instructor can be a foremost instrument. When instructors present their materials or learning exercises in creative ways— the medium becomes the message. Teaching creatively comes from an aversion to orthodoxy in content and ritual in practice. It involves a touch of the unexpected as well as a high level of student involvement. Creative learning contains elements of discovery and insight. The journey begins without knowing exactly where it will end. The pedagogy is planned and mapped, but with an element of destination unknown.

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