

Creativity, Learning and Wellness

By Tony Glover

Introduction and Context:

Schools tend to be more conscious than before of mental and emotional health and approaches to address these matters challenge the very purpose and nature of the education system.

Systems vary in terms of the intensity of prescribed content and assessment but case study evidence from a sample of schools suggests that students are tending to need more support to cope with the pressures which they face. Where the focus in the curriculum is overwhelmingly on the transmission of prescribed knowledge, and with this being the basis upon which schools and students are “judged”, the more naturally “creative” disciplines such as Art, Design, Music and Drama tend to be side-lined; in a number of schools in England the curriculum has become much more traditionally “academic” than before, with these subjects either omitted or offered as extra-curricular opportunities. Yet the contention of this paper is that opportunities for students to develop and enhance their creativity can have a profound and positive impact upon the quality of their learning and personal wellbeing.

The most successful schools, with the highest levels of student engagement and positivity meet the challenges to wellness with a holistic view of the individual learner. They also demonstrate a conscious and inherent support for the teacher, reinforcing the notion of co-learning. This is in spite of the reality that to varying degrees the work of schools may be constrained by units of time, space, prescribed content and testing.

There is a wealth of research supporting the notion that people perform better in areas such as education, business, sport and the arts when they feel positive about who they are and when they have a clear sense of purpose. Yet from experience of visiting and working with a sample of schools I have found huge differences in the level of priority given to wellness. For some schools, any practice relating to wellbeing seems to be just an occasional “add-on”. In schools where there is a vibrant culture of learning, however, the activities and practices which promote wellness and positivity are integral.

The Digital Age

What many of us see as the “digital revolution” has brought major changes to learning, to communication and interaction and to wellbeing. For students, this is the only world that they know, with almost limitless opportunities for learning, for the gaining of knowledge and for connectivity. In turn, levels of discernment are needed, which were simply not relevant in the pre-digital age, and issues have arisen over mental and emotional wellness, which were largely not applicable before.

Baroness Susan Greenfield (2017) refers to the impact of “the screen-based mentality” upon young people and the potential lack of emotional intelligence which can result from a preponderance of communication by digital means rather than by direct personal interaction. We have a two-dimensional world of only sight and sound which offers “instant information, connected identity, diminished privacy and here-and-now experiences so vivid they out-compete the real world of three dimensions and five senses” (Greenfield, 2017, p. 2). There are a number of potential “threats posed by the digital world to emotions and well-being, such as short

attention span, poor interpersonal skills and a fragile sense of identity...” Greenfield (2017) also offers a way forward: “...surely the answer is to foster creativity, novel insights for everyone...” The challenges for educators are firstly to be conscious of this and secondly to devise approaches which will exploit the connectivity, the capacity for design and the access to information which are provided through digital communication; what is essential is that these approaches take place within a context in which students will develop the empathy, the emotional intelligence, the positivity and the sense of purpose which will enhance their wellbeing. Ironically, the technology itself, which has been a vehicle for “the screen-based mentality”, can also be used as a vehicle for creativity.

Dispelling a Myth

A number of famous creative people have experienced mental illness. The list includes Vincent Van Gogh, Virginia Woolf, and Robert Schumann. Some people have been tempted to make a connection between creative ability and mental illness, presumably because both involve a deviation from the norm. Albert Rothenberg M.D., Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, notes, “Given the magnitude of creative achievement I am often perplexed about the recurring tendency in recent history to connect creativity with mental disability and illness....” (2015). Such diagnoses arise from general biographies and hearsay rather than from any scientific, clinical source. Creativity requires special or uncommon capacities in that by definition it moves from normative modes of thought, and it has this in common with mental illness. Whereas mental illness, however, intrinsically involves suffering, “creative artists’ productivity is purposeful, and euphoria results almost always from exceptional achievement” (Rothenberg, 2015, p. 2).

An inescapable conclusion for educators is that in fostering the opportunities for students to develop and enhance their creativity, they are also fostering positivity and mental and emotional wellness.

Teachers and Students:

Where teachers are working as co-leaders and co-learners with students they themselves need to be valued, supported and very strongly connected with the values and purpose of the school. In terms of supporting the professional development of teachers and empowering them to lead and to work creatively the most successful schools constantly review both their ways of working and the working environment with the aims of managing workload and of enabling teachers to focus on a positive, constructive and collaborative approach to fulfilling the core purpose. Opportunities which promote healthy living and reflect a collective responsibility are provided. As for students, there are schools that offer “student voice lite”. Interviews with students in such schools reveal that the students do not tend to feel particularly valued or positive about their role in the school. Collaborative approaches and student leadership of learning are integral strands of a modern learning approach, and yet not all schools fully embrace this. Where students are real co-constructors of their learning, where they have an individual voice and where they have a genuine say in the organisation of and environment for their learning they tend to be much more positive. The integration of creative experiences within the curriculum will help further to enhance the self-esteem amongst the students which in turn will enable them to engage fully in modern learning.

In terms of curriculum, the schools which have the highest level of student engagement across the curriculum are those that provide opportunities for individual and collaborative creativity. For many students this will be the creativity fostered through visual arts, music or drama. For others it will be through approaches in other areas of the curriculum which encourage creative expression.

A focus on creativity should not just centre on the individual. In some of the most successful learning practices, groups of students take collective responsibility for the learning of all members of the group. Collaborative learning can reinforce positivity and a sense of purpose within the community; it can also promote tolerance, empathy and understanding. In turn, students with a strong sense of purpose and high self-esteem can contribute effectively to the learning and wellbeing of others within the group.

The Importance and Impact of Creativity

As the research mentioned above suggests, there is overwhelming evidence of a link between student positivity and creativity. In 2010, Stuckey and Noble reviewed existing literature on the benefits of the arts and conclude that creative expression has a powerful impact on health and well-being among various patient populations. They find that most of the studies in their review support the view that participation and/ or engagement in artistic pursuits have a range of outcomes. These include a decrease in depressive symptoms, an increase in positive emotions, reduction in stress responses and, in some cases, even improvements in the functioning of the immune system. Charles Benayoun (2017) adds the following benefits of creative expression: increasing self-esteem and feelings of accomplishment, improving concentration and focus and increasing happiness.

The value of students' co-leadership of learning has been thoroughly documented. Charles Benayoun (2017) notes that "... creativity is also regarded as a core competency for those in a leadership role." As far back as 2003, in the Harvard Business Review, Diane Coutu analyses the components of resilient leadership and concludes that resilience requires three main elements: the ability to face down reality, the ability to find meaning in aspects of life and the ability to improvise.

In schools and systems where the pressure to excel in examinations, which cover the memorisation and recall of knowledge, dominates everything else, creativity is often marginalised. This is surely likely to involve a failure to provide for the future needs of the workforce and for the wellness of students. On the other hand, there are examples in some of the most successful schools in inner city areas, with high levels of social deprivation, of conscious strategies to support the disadvantaged students through the provision of distinctive Art and Music programmes. The positivity which these students gain through creative expression and a sense of achievement in these programmes has also been seen to have significant benefits upon their approach to learning and their achievement across the rest of the curriculum.

Conclusion:

This paper offers merely a snapshot of the value of enabling students to engage in creative expression, yet the importance of creative studies in promoting high quality learning and

wellness is overwhelming. The digital age, with the rapid and seemingly constant change which it brings, offers both a challenge and almost limitless opportunity. It is incumbent upon educators to devise strategies that will integrate the connectivity, the wealth of information and the creative potential offered by digital technology into a holistic approach to wellness and to learning.

There are systems in which the curriculum is content-driven, with a major emphasis on the transmission of knowledge and on memorisation and recall. These systems would normally have regular and rigorous testing of acquired knowledge. Where this is the case, creativity can be, at least, marginalised. Yet the impact of creativity upon health, positivity and wellness can be all pervasive, and schools should embrace this in determining their curriculum and their methodology. In serving the genuine interests of the students, can they afford not to?

About the author: Until 31st August 2012 Tony Glover was the Head Teacher of The Becket School, Nottingham, England, a secondary school rated as "Outstanding". He was also one of the first Head Teachers to be appointed to the role of National Leader of Education, with the remit of working with underperforming schools to raise standards. He is now a consultant, researcher, presenter and adviser on school leadership and learning.

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