Reflective Practices in the Composition and Literature Classroom:

Strategies to Encourage Imagination and Self-Assessment

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Abstract: One's imagination is opened from a young age; parents begin encouraging their children to use their imagination for entertainment early in life, yet when children enter primary and secondary school, students are encouraged to embrace technology and use their imagination and creativity to use technology to complete assignments successfully; however, when students begin to enter higher education, simple assignments that do not require the use of technology astound them. How is it that a simple task of taking understanding of a text to complete an assignment just using one's imagination is more difficult for students when technology is not involved? How can instructors not only encourage students to use reflective practices to assess their own learning and increase imagination but also implement reflective practices to assess teaching style to improve student retention and engagement in the classroom to increase student success?

Key words: imagination and self-assessment, reflective practices, meditation, critical thinking, writing across the curriculum

1. Introduction

One's imagination is opened from a young age; parents begin encouraging their children to use their imagination for entertainment early in life, yet when children enter primary and secondary school, students are encouraged to embrace technology and use their imagination and creativity to use technology to complete assignments successfully; however, when students begin to enter higher education, simple assignments that do not require the use of technology astound them. How is it that a simple task of taking understanding of a text to complete an assignment just using one's imagination is more difficult for students when technology is not involved? How can instructors not only encourage students to use reflective practices to assess their own learning and increase imagination but also implement reflective practices to assess teaching style to improve student retention and engagement in the classroom to increase student success?

The community college classroom is changing from the traditional lecture, instructor focused classroom and is slowly transitioning into the collaborative, student focused environment. With the creation of technology, secondary schools place a large focus on how technology can be beneficial to students, but students lose their ability to create without the use of technology. Technology, wonderful in certain aspects of the learning process, should be a secondary tool for students to use and not the primary. First and foremost, it is important to understand

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creativity. What is it? It has emerged as a complex concept that defines an individual, but in reality, creativity is not the result of individual action alone (Donnelly, 2004, p. 157). Creativity, is an act that cannot be defined by one thing and can take on many different meanings. When individuals are younger, creativity was honed through the use of imagination — playing with an imaginary friend, role-playing with others or alone, creating new games and stories. These practices are encouraged in younger students, but by the time students reach college, they become discouraged when an instructor says, "Think outside the box." In my experience, students would rather write a paper than use their imagination to create and demonstrate learning. In order to decrease students' fears of using imagination and ask them to be creative, it first needs to be modeled for them (Donnelly, 2004, p. 157). It has become apparent that not only learning, but also imagination and creativity can only be achieved in the right environment. In order to create the right environment, students need to not only feel safe but also welcomed. With the traditional, lecture based classroom, the majority of students are silent and allow those with strong opinions to share their insights. One reason students are silent is because they fear they are wrong, and with the transition from the traditional lecture classroom to the collaborative, student focused classroom, students are still fearful that what they say is wrong. If students feel safe and know that there is no consequence for voicing an opinion, they are more likely to collaborate, and this collaboration is the first step in students opening their imaginations to become creative in the classroom.

Creativity comes in many forms: personal innovation ("the innovation does not need to be something that is universally recognized as being new, but something that is new to individuals; it is about the transfer and adaptation of ideas from one context to another"); risk taking; and comprehension of something's complexity (Donnelly, 2004, pp. 161–162). And if creativity is necessary means of learning for higher education students, then educators first need to reflect on the realities that face students today; furthermore, use of imagination and creativity needs to first begin with the educator through curriculum development and then transition into the hands of the students to promote self-awareness, self-assessment, and individualized learning (Donnelly, 2004, p. 162).

In order for the college classroom to transfer from the traditional lecture, instructor focused environment to the collaborative, student focused environment, use of imagination and creativity needs to begin with the instructor through the use of reflective practices. Reflective practices such as meditation, reflection, and journaling allow an individual to see all possible options and can open doorways to a more individualized and complex learning experience for students. Meditation and reflection is known to decrease stress and increase motivation in individuals; furthermore, journaling is a way to see what is happening, what can happen, what is working, what is not working, and allow for change to happen through imagination and creativity. Reflective practices alone are not enough in order to produce creativity; these practices can lead to practices that not only facilitate imagination but also initiate creativity through contemplative practices inside and outside of the classroom. Contemplative practices are defined by The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society as "…practices that quiet the mind in order to cultivate a personal capacity for deep concentration and insight. Examples of contemplative practice include not only sitting in silence but also many forms of single minded concentration, including meditation, contemplative prayer, mindful walking, focused experiences in nature, yoga, and other contemporary physical practices" (Rendón, 2009, p. 70). As a student or educator, you become vulnerable not only to yourself but to those around you. It is always risky attempting something new as you do not know if the desired outcome will be achieved, but taking a risk is a step toward making meaningful connections to learning. Through reflection, you are able to see through your faults and create change in order to lead you to find your authentic self, inside and outside the classroom.

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As educators, we are taught that modeling is the most successful way to teach students; and in order for us to model creativity for our students, we need to apply reflective practices to our own work in order to change and invent curriculum that is welcoming and exciting for our students. Some ways we, as educators, can do this is to reflect on not only our past learning experiences but also on student success rates in our classroom. Reflection through guided questions such as what are the goals of this assignment; how can these goals be met; and what is the intended end result will help guide you in curriculum development. Observation during class of student reactions and comments will help guide you when reflecting after class. Guided questions such as what happened; what can change to make this better; were expected end results achieved and so forth will allow you to continue to use your imagination to be creative in the classroom. This self-reflection will lead to self-awareness of how information is being delivered in the classroom as well as self-assessment of what needs to be changed and how it can be changed.

For students, reflective practices before, during, and after the learning process that lead to contemplative practices inside and outside of the classroom can be beneficial to their learning process in multiple ways. Not only do these techniques increase critical thinking skills in students but also are techniques that are transferable across disciplines and eventually into the work force.

To introduce this type of reflection with students, it is important to have students first reflect on their primary goals. This works well for first-time College students in freshman composition. Rather than focusing on one or two assignments that include such practices, an entire sixteen-week semester course can been developed where self-reflection is necessary to reach self-awareness and self-assessment in order to achieve individualized and meaningful learning. To start, students are asked to reflect on their learning from the past, present, and future to know what their desired end result of not only the course is but also what their desired end result of college is. It was Robin William's character, Dr. John Keating, in the 1989's film *Dead Poets Society*, who challenged his students during a time where conformity was the norm and thinking outside the box was viewed as rebellious. In order to create creativity in his students, Dr. Keating stated:

> We do not read and write poetry because it is cute; we read and write poetry because we are members of the human race, and the human race is filled with passion…but poetry, romance, love, are all things we live for…you are here; life exists…the powerful play goes on so that you can contribute a verse. What will your verse be? (*Dead poets society*)

From this scene, students are asked to reflect on what their verse will be. Through the semester, and through a series of reflection papers on texts that revolve around the self, students are given the opportunity to not only learn about themselves but also learn and understand the writing process more fully through the means of creativity. Revision of the student's verse is completed many times during the semester (first day of class, after each major writing assignment, and last day of class) building a student's awareness of their learning and allowing him/her to assess their own learning and make changes in order to reach success. This form of reflection also leads students in the process of applying contemplative practices such as art into their learning to further discover creativity. In the growing digital age of technology, students can be given the opportunity to not only meditate and reflect but also use technology to their advantage in order to build and increase critical thinking skills through imagination and creativity. Assignments in composition and literature courses that require students to analyze and synthesize information can be done creatively through the means of aspects of social media in which students are familiar. Such assignments include students summarizing, analyzing, interpreting, synthesizing, or explicating a

piece of text through a student-created MEME, an original photograph that encompasses literary elements such as theme, motif, or symbol with an accompanied hashtag (#), or creation of a rap/song or mockumentary to share with the class. Such creative application to show knowledge and understanding reaches younger students and allows them to become creative. In the process, students are using their imagination and creativity through fun and exciting assignments while also building and utilizing critical thinking skills.

Using reflective practices that can lead toward completive practices such as meditation, reflection, journaling, and creation of art, will allow not only students but also instructors to see different points of view — not only their own but also those around them. These techniques can be applied across disciplines and everyday tasks completed in the workplace to not only increase creativity but also productivity. The techniques used by both students and educators will help identify ones weakness, strength, and purpose allowing one to become not only a better learner but also a better student, educator, and mentor by allowing one to further create meaningful learning experiences. As we see Dr. Keating's students learn and grow from his own creativity and risk taking in the classroom in *Dead Poets Society*, we, as instructors, should follow his example by taking the risk of using imagination and ask ourselves: "What will our verse be?"

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