

Drill and Skill

Progressive educators are wrong to think that rote learning stifles creativity.

By Roger Scruton

A litany of opposites has developed in the theory of education: creativity versus routine, spontaneity versus rules, imagination versus rote learning, innovation versus conformity.

Children write poetry before they have memorized a single line of it, dance before they have learnt a single step, paint and daub without the faintest knowledge of figurative drawing.

They are encouraged to empathize with historical characters, and to express their 'geographical skills,' without having the first idea of the history and geography of their country. Grammar, spelling and punctuation are downgraded in the interests of creative self-expression.

Imagine an educational guru who told us that nothing mattered in mathematics so much as creativity! This rarely happens, since it is obvious even to educationists that you can be a creative genius in mathematics only if you have acquired the discipline of mathematical proof.

They also recognize that chemistry taught with a régime of pure self-expression would soon degenerate into alchemy, just as 'creative' physics would be hard to distinguish from witchcraft.

Why then do they think that things are so different in the case of language, history, and the arts? The answer is to be found in the long tradition of woolly thinking that began with Rousseau.

On the one hand, educationists believe, there is the objective world of facts, and this we must explore through disciplined learning and the building of theories. On the other hand, there is the subjective world of opinions, feeling and artistic urges, to be explored through self-expression.

Such thinking is contradicted by the obvious fact that self-expression is not innate but acquired. We do children a great wrong by withholding the

discipline, the knowledge, and the store of examples that confer the art of self-expression. The anger of many young people now leaving school is the anger of the inarticulate.

Especially in the arts, the shibboleth of creativity has been counterproductive. Consider Mozart, whose ever-fresh, ever-lucid melodies are among the most original creations of mankind.

Mozart did not become a creative genius merely by letting it all hang out, even though he had more to hang out than anyone. He was rigorously and relentlessly schooled by his father, subjected to the ordeal of public performances, trained in the art of memory and in the grammar of the classical style.

Of course, Mozarts are few and far between, but it is all the more reason to be as disciplined as Mozart. With the discipline, there is a chance of being creative; without it, there is no chance at all.

Visit a British art school for the finalists' show and you are almost certain to find an array of discarded objects, random cutouts, rehashes of Duchamp's urinal, maybe just an old coat with the artist's name-tag pinned to it — all praised and rewarded for the 'creativity,' and all as dull and empty as the work of caged chimpanzees.

Hardly an art school in our country now insists on figurative drawing, clay modeling, casting, or the mastery of pigments — still less a knowledge of art history, or an ability to discern just why the planes of a Matisse interior intersect at an acute angle, or the shadows of a Constable are done in yellows and browns.

Of course, artistic ability is not like scientific knowledge: you cannot acquire it merely by diligent study. There comes a point where a leap of the imagination is required. What is so striking about the art works produced

on a diet of unadulterated creativity is not that they are new and surprising, but that they are drawn from a repertoire of clichés already done to death by the modernists, and now reduced to a routine.

The originality of Mozart's music is inseparable from its rule-guided objectivity. It has a logic and an orderliness that come from the supreme grasp of musical grammar. Real originality does not defy convention but depends on it.

You can only "make it new" when the newness is perceivable, which means departing from conventions while at the same time affirming them. Originality requires tradition if it is to make artistic sense.

But what about the rest of us? Why should we, who are not geniuses, acquire the knowledge needed by those who are? This is a difficult question, but it is really tantamount to asking why schools should teach art, literature, and music at all. I like to believe that people who acquire artistic, musical or literary skills, but who lack the divine spark, are nevertheless an addition to the common good.

People who have learnt poetry by rote and who know how to compose the occasional sonnet may not revolutionize the consciousness of mankind as Shakespeare, Wordsworth or Baudelaire did.

But they are likely to understand what those great writers were saying, are likely to live on a more exalted plane as a result of doing so, and are also able, through their life and example, to make a positive contribution to the great war against Dullness.

(© Roger Scruton/ The Sunday Times, 20th May 2001. Mr. Scruton is a plain-talking philosopher and writer. His ideas about architecture were the basis of the Prince of Wales' famous disputes with modern building practices.)