

Creative visual journals can help students develop creative capacities and can equip them with the ability to carry creative thinking skills beyond the art room.

# d iving Into the Creative Realm

MEGAN CULP

Once heard an artist compare the creative process to diving deeply under the water and remaining immersed as you create, staying under for long periods of time, only coming up for a quick breath of air before returning to the depths. This remains the truest description of the experience of making art that I have encountered. I, too, make these deep dives. I have had to learn how deep I can and want to go, how to use the equipment, and how to identify when I can stay under for long periods or when a quick dive is in order. I believe that this diving is how we find content for art, how we become intimate with what our art will be about. It is necessary.



Figure 1. Creative journal prompt response created by student. Used with permission.

When I began teaching high school art, I joined a meticulously structured art program that produced careful students with impressive technical skill. I taught a skill-based Foundations course to primarily 9th-grade students, who were new to high school and looking for both comfort and inspiration in this nearly adult world. The students churned out the same projects year after year, with little variation; they were compliant rule-followers. But when asked to make independent decisions, they were scared, uneasy, unwilling, and sometimes unable. Questions such as “What should I do next?” and “Does this look right?” were common. The students looked to *me* as the authority on their work, but my goal was to make *them* the authority. The act of teaching skills and how to use the equipment was necessary, but not enough; I needed to teach them how to take the dive.

Zimmerman (2009) supports the notion that our increasingly visual and global culture necessitates a paradigm shift for the field of art education. She urges teachers to move away from the assumption that creativity is for the artistically talented alone and to recognize the teachable creative potential of all art students (p. 395). With this in mind, I searched for a way to maintain the skill-building structure of my Foundations course while allowing the students to also learn to turn their bodies in the water of creative thought. My solution was a creative journal and accompanying prompts designed to guide short dives into discovering one’s own creative voice and capacity. These journals opened worlds and forged connections for my students that I had assumed were a distant dream. Students’ interactions with the prompts practiced a way of thinking creatively that has broad implications for my young-adult students, both academically and personally. In this article, I describe the creative journal, the students’ responses, and the implications for creative pedagogy in high school art curriculum.

## The Creative Journal

On the first day of Foundations class, a hesitant flock of loose-limbed students filed into my classroom. Most of them thought they knew what to expect from Foundations, having seen years of carefully crafted projects hanging on the school walls, predictable in their appearance and popping up reliably at certain times of the year. After explaining the arc of the curriculum and its aim to anchor the students’ understanding in the formal elements of art, I handed them each a small black sketchbook. I told them they would respond to one journal prompt each week. I explained that this would be their creative journal and not necessarily a sketchbook, since not all of us explore through drawing alone. It was a place for them to stretch their ideas, explore materials, and discover their own

visual voices. Class was a place to learn how to use the equipment; the journal was a place to swim around and see where the equipment could take them.

The prompts stemmed from the formal curriculum and were designed to provide opportunity for self-constructed creative thought. As one student explained, they were designed to allow the students to think “both inside and outside the confines of the prompt.”<sup>1</sup> Aiming to give my students both support and freedom in their journals, I designed the prompts with Sandra Kay’s *Elegant Problem* model in mind. Kay (1997) uses the term *Elegant Problem* to describe her method of forming lessons, which engender cognitive growth in the art room. She states,

*Producing the environment for novel and inventive solutions characterizes a well-composed problem. If the assignment encourages flexibility, fluency, elaboration, and originality of responses, it has met the four characteristics often used to define creative thought. By designing a problem that encourages these behaviors, creative teaching elicits creative thought. (p. 281)*

For each in-class project, I provided three prompt choices: one that sprung from an investigation of a contemporary artist, one that asked the students to explore materials, and one that presented a conceptual idea related to the projects created in class. The prompts that investigated contemporary artists were designed to expose the students to artists who are making and responding to the world the students inhabit, and to reflect the processes of the current art world. The material-exploration prompts provided the space and time to play and expanded the students’ understanding of materials. The prompts that cultivated an understanding of conceptual thought provoked the students’ associations of qualities of thought, words, and images. These associations help make the subliminal connections between visual information and perception more obvious.

Having the ability to choose prompts that spoke to the students individually opened the door to a variety of responses and an ownership of content, which led to deep connections and personal revelations. As Burton (2000) states, “for only if learning is situated in compelling personal contexts will it be grounded enough to inform new ways of knowing, thinking and representing” (p. 343).

## Prompts Designed to Provoke Creative Thought

Table 1 shows the alignment of classroom projects, journal themes, and journal prompts. For each week of a given project, students chose one of three prompts. The first prompt for each project is based on conceptual ideas, the second on material exploration, and the third on contemporary artists.

These journals opened worlds and forged connections for my students that I had assumed were a distant dream.

RIGHT:  
Table 1. This Is What  
Happened When the  
Students Began to Dive.

BELOW:  
Figure 2. Creative journal  
prompt response created  
by student. Used with  
permission.

In-Class Project	Visual Journal Prompts
<p>Universal Puzzle Piece: In class, you will design and arrange shapes that connect infinitely. In your journal, you will further explore the ideas of connection, relationship, and organization.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Our minds have the ability to make patterns and connections in places we don't expect. Go to the 10th word on page 158 in any book. Write the word in your journal and create an image based on the word.</li> <li>2. Think of a group that you belong to (family, friends, class, club, team...). Create shapes that represent these people. Consider how arranging them might show the connection between them and you.</li> <li>3. Look at the following works by Christopher Taggart (who also studied physics): <i>Colony (Scales of Justice)</i>, <i>Altogether Significant Nudes (With Nimitta)</i>, <i>Summit</i>, <i>People Looking at People</i>. Taggart uses cut-up photographs, playing cards, and governmental data to "order and reorder" visual organization. He often uses tessellating shapes as his structure for reordering. Find a photograph or other document of importance to you and experiment with a way to visually transform it through some type of organization.</li> </ol>
<p>Positive/Negative Design: In class, you will work on a design that uses positive and negative space as its driving force. To produce your final design, you will learn to control paint and brush. In your journal, you will experiment with different ways to paint and think further about the words "positive" and "negative."</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Take a look at your piece from class (snap a photo if you need to). Write an entry addressing this question: Are you the positive space or the negative space? Why?</li> <li>2. Find as many objects as you can to paint with. Paint an image that has either positive or negative energy.</li> <li>3. Draw one of Yasuaki Oishi's Negative Space Installations sculptures from one of the photographs or use plastic bags to twist, fold, bend, etc., to make a composition that has positive and/or negative energy.</li> </ol>
<p>Paper Sculpture: In class, you will work on a small paper sculpture, seeing how positive and negative space manifest in three dimensions. In your journal, you will further explore the notion of space and experiment with paper as a sculptural material.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Explore the notion of space. Sit in either a very large or very small space for 15 minutes and write down as many observations as you can.</li> <li>2. Write a secret on large piece of paper and rip it up. Using the pieces and one other material, create a low-relief image in your journal.</li> <li>3. Inspired by Ernesto Neto's <i>Sculptural Installation</i>, add another sensory experience (other than sight) to your journal entry.</li> </ol>



## Exposing Students to the Role and Function of Contemporary Art

The Universal Puzzle Piece assignment asked students to design a tessellating shape and then arrange seven repetitions of the shape into a pleasing composition accurately drawn freehand. When asked to respond to the work of contemporary artist Christopher Taggart, one student created a layered image of fire and figures in a field, reflecting his connection to environmental concerns. In an interview, the student explained:

I am an environmentalist, an echo-warrior. And I feel very strongly that as humans, [through] global warming and climate change, we are creating problems for ourselves. And even though it may seem like we are doing good—we are making money, we have power, we have this society that is technologically advanced and yet we are so barbaric in things like mountain top removal, taking away habitats and destroying them. I feel like we should do whatever we can to stop that.

Instances like these revealed that the students' journal responses had the power to provoke personal voice and, in turn, content in their images. Additionally, investigating contemporary artists validated the students' desire for originality in their own work. One student stated:

I think [looking at contemporary art] was a little bit of encouragement to really go out of the bounds of traditional art. I feel like with contemporary art those boundaries are there, but a lot of people have broken out of that. I feel like it is more of a common thing to do your own thing, be unique, and I really like that.

The opportunity to exercise originality is a key component in creativity (Beattie, 2000) and an important cognitive ability for artistic growth (Burton, 2000). Burton describes originality as "the ability to seize different possibilities and reconceive them in fresh ways; in short, originality undergrids independent thinking" (p. 340). It is one of the four cognitive abilities that plays a pervasive role in artistic development: elaboration, originality, fluency, and resistance to closure. These abilities work in concert to create "habits of mind" that unite materials with intent.

## Cultivating an Understanding of Conceptual Thought in Art

The Positive/Negative Design asked the students to produce a black-and-white design this was approximately 50% positive and 50% negative space, and use these spaces as the driving force of the image. The corresponding conceptual idea prompt provoked the students' thinking about the words *positive* and *negative* in relation to themselves.

One student's Positive Negative/Design was composed of two black crescent-like curves that encountered each other at their pointed ends, separated by only a sliver of white. Her journal entry responding to the prompt explained that her image was a metaphor for her role in conflict:

I guess I thought of the places where the points touch and the places that kind of hold together the tension... 'cause I was thinking of the time I was between two friends who don't like each other or two family members who are arguing with each other and that's that kind of stability in the tension, that white space.

She used her image to form a personal understanding of her peace-making abilities among friends and family. I discovered that the creative journal prompts focused on investigating conceptual ideas consistently led the students to use visual thinking to make connections to knowledge and events of personal meaning, recontextualizing their images in relation to their own lives.

## Providing the Opportunity to Explore the Capacities of Materials

The Paper Sculpture project asked students to construct a paper sculpture using manipulations of a single shape in a variety of sizes. In response to the material-exploration prompt, one student constructed in his journal a multilevel image of little ripped pieces of white paper that were held together in small mounds by layers of clear hot glue. When I asked him to explain what he was thinking when creating the entry, he said:

I was experimenting with adding depth to a piece without making it like a structure. I got a lot of my ideas over the summer working at the Franklin Institute [a local science museum]. This is my science thing. I was also thinking about 3-D printing.

Frequently, students would use the journals as an opportunity to connect art to other academic areas of interest through an integration of concepts. This student also noted how the form of the journal image reflected the fact that it was created from a secret:

I think it is a little bit messy and I feel like, because secrets they can get messy if they get out there, people are gossips. So I think it's not only messy once it's out there it's sometimes messy when you keep it in. So it brings out the disorientation that can come from any side you attack a secret.

At these times, when students combine their knowledge of lived experience with constructed knowledge to create journal responses, we see an opportunity to reconcile the inner and outer dimensions of the emerging self through the exploration of materials (Burton, 2000).

Figure 3. Creative journal prompt response created by student. Used with permission.



It is the interplay of personal experience, social experience, and materials that creates the desire to communicate through visual art.

## Looking at the Range of Engagement

Throughout the year, I saw that some students who began with shallow dives started to dive deeper with more practice; some students had been waiting for the opportunity to dive and did so quickly and deeply; and other students remained fearful and did not respond well to the journal. It was important for me to talk with and to understand not only the students who were dedicated to the journal, but also those for whom it never quite took hold. The latter students reported a range of obstacles, including not enough choice and prompts that were too open-ended. This feedback suggests that, for some students, the prompts lay beyond their affective dimension of learning. As Kay (1997) suggests, the affective dimension of learning can be described by Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) "flow construct," which explains intrinsic motivation in relation to skill and challenge. His theory suggests that one is intrinsically motivated to engage in a task when the challenge of the task matches the level of skill. Intrinsic motivation is lost when skill is insufficient to meet the challenge of a task, creating anxiety; or when skill exceeds the challenge of a task and results in boredom. This issue could be addressed by developing prompts, with the goal of creating a more flexible zone of affective learning. This need would necessitate the development of a tool to periodically determine the range of each particular group of students.

## Why Use a Journal to Develop Creative Capacities?

My decision to include a creative journal in my course was spurred by the conspicuous lack of creative thought in the curriculum. Technical skill and formal elements of art dominate the traditional high school curricula, leaving students without the opportunity to develop their creative capacities—a vital and growing necessity in our 21st-century society. The need to develop students' creative capacities has been reinforced by art education scholars and developmental psychologists, who urge educators to move beyond the assumption that creativity is only for the artistically talented. Rather, we should adopt a paradigm that assumes the teachable creative potential of all students in the face of an increasingly visual and global culture. Victor Lowenfeld was one of the first scholars to stress the importance of creative habits of mind in the curriculum, stating:

With the improved creativeness of the individual, his greater sensitivity toward experiences, and his increased ability to integrate them, the quality of his aesthetic product will also grow. Focusing attention upon the painting, drawing, or construction puts emphasis upon the end product only and limits growth to present understanding of the field of art, and in particular to the taste of the individual teacher. Focusing upon the child, however, makes the creative process extremely important, not only

to the potential artist but to every child, regardless of how or in what profession this creativity will be utilized. (Lowenfeld & Brittam, 1964, p. 11-12)

The creative journal has carved a space to harness my students' inherent creative capacities, *along with* developing technical skill, to form a foundational knowledge in visual art.

## Conclusion

Just as students should leave their Foundational year of art with a beginning sense of composition, color, value, and materials, so should they be cultivating their creative capacities. With the equipment exercised and the waters tested, students will be prepared to continue their journey; for it is the interplay of personal experience, social experience, and materials that creates the desire to communicate through visual art. Implementing intentional creative pedagogy, such as a creative journal, encourages students to find their creative voice and content, and equips them with the ability to carry their creative thinking skills beyond the art room to meet the demands of our contemporary society.

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*Megan Culp is an Art Educator at Germantown Friends School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. E-mail: MeganBerryCulp@gmail.com*

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## AUTHOR NOTE

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## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> Student quotes that appear in the article are excerpts from transcribed interviews conducted between November 2013 and January 2014.