

Refocusing Creativity on Good

A REVIEW OF *CREATIVITY, WISDOM AND TRUSTEESHIP* BY ANNA CRAFT, HOWARD GARDNER, AND GUY CLAXTON (EDS).

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No, this is not a book about school boards, but it does have a message for them: “Education has shied away from taking moral stands over the past few decades. If it is not too late, it may be time for education to overcome its reticence and be more willing to stand up for the Good” (p. 176).

Following a Cambridge seminar on Creativity organized by the British Educational Research Association, Anna Craft, Howard Gardner, and Guy Claxton prepared ‘target chapters’ on “the often uneasy connections among creativity, wisdom, trusteeship and education” (pp. 1-2). These were then circulated to nine other academics for response. The book is comprised of the target chapters, the responses, and a concluding chapter by the authors.

The unifying thread of this book is a concern with virtue (a.k.a. wisdom), since “[c]reativity developed without wisdom may not serve children, their families and their communities ... and thus its uncritical encouragement may be seen as a questionable endeavor” (p. 5). Therefore, the authors argue, education should infuse its efforts to develop creativity with equal attention to engendering wisdom.

Unfortunately, we seem not to be doing well so far. Gardner reports that Harvard’s Good-Work Project has found “a decreasing tendency among ambitious young people to prioritize the *common good*” and, moreover, that they “frequently bent rules and cut corners for self-aggrandizement” (p. 7). The project seeks to reverse that trend by understanding how it is “possible for individuals who desire to do good work – work that is excellent in quality, ethically-oriented, and meaningful to the practitioner – to succeed at a time when things are changing very quickly, markets are very powerful, and there are few if any counterforces to the market (such as potent religious, ideological, or communal forces)” (p. 49).

Enter trusteeship. Gardner proposes that “a new covenant must be formed between professionals and the society in which they live.” Scientists “must relinquish the once-justifiable claim that they have no responsibility for applications and undertake a good-faith effort

to make sure that the fruits of science are applied wisely, not foolishly” (p. 53). Gardner mixes the terms ‘scientist’ and ‘professional’ somewhat casually, but in this book he is really speaking to educators. He encourages them to take up the challenge to act as ‘societal trustees’ by inculcating not only creativity but also wisdom, which in Claxton’s target chapter is seen to begin with empathy and be defined “not by the astuteness of cognition per se, but the [virtuous] nature of the underlying motivational vector that is driving cognition” (p. 45).

The nine scholars who respond to the thesis of the target chapters speak around it but, for the most part, not directly to it. They were presumably chosen because of their related research interests, which they discuss thoughtfully but with varying relevance and importance to the thesis of the target chapters. Although fragmented and brief, the comments by this potpourri of professors do expand the discussion and yield some interesting nuggets such as the following:

- Wisdom and creativity are uncomfortable companions; the former generally suggests judicious action that respects traditions and sociocultural contexts while the latter often suggests a break with traditions and norms (p. 78).
- “We must find ways to help young people use dialogue as a means of understanding multiple perspectives and positions, to manage parallel and dissonant points of view without seeking the hegemonic unitary solution” (p. 103).
- While we have a duty to protect children, if we prevent them engaging with the real problems in our world we risk them developing “learned helplessness, often leading not only to despair but also to irresponsibility resulting from the felt lack of influence” (p. 130).

In the final chapter, the authors restate their thesis by noting, “[C]reativity is debased if it serves only as the spoonful of sugar that makes the medicine go down.” They debunk some common notions, pointing out that we often “misrepresent creativity” by showing “only the side of it that is fun and easy”; that it is “not merely – perhaps not even

principally – a solitary activity”; that it is “not a culturally universal or neutral idea”; and that, beyond science and the fine arts, “we both find and need considerable creativity... in the conduct of human affairs” (pp. 168-169). Noting that creativity is “an essential aspect of everyday life”, the authors conclude that it needs to be “exercised responsibly, to have some moral underpinning” (p. 169). Finally, with some judicious cherry-picking from the responses, they briefly consider some of the educational implications of the discussion. Unfortunately, this is limited to the ‘ten thousand foot view’.

Creativity, Wisdom and Trusteeship is a book of theory that provides critique and exhortation, but little practical advice. Nonetheless, it is engaging, provocative and thoughtful – well worth reading by policy makers and practitioners alike. |

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