

## The Edge of Social Creativity in Prevention

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Like the previous year, the core, (REEL Talk) ACT OUT film program members were provided with a range of information and support regarding sexual and relationship violence. The youth challenged their 'mental representations' concerning this issue. That is, they were confronted by research-based information that often contravened what they believed to be true. We see this as a very powerful and effective approach when combined with the filmmaking process since they were able to model situations in real-time through performance, rehearsal and script development. For example, a student might assert that a victim/survivor in the script puts herself/himself in jeopardy if she/he drinks alcohol and therefore bears some responsibility for her/his assault. In another case, claims that a victim/survivor invites 'soft' abuse by his or her attitude or demeanor ('irritating' or 'annoying') were tested through modeling during script revisions and rehearsals. The students were able to scrutinize this claim by seeing the situation enacted in a number of subtle ways. Through this process the students could isolate that 'moment' where the story reveals the attitude (subject-position) of the abuser as predatory or controlling. This serves as a learning opportunity as well as conceptual problem of script development. While the assertion in the drinking example might be dispatched early in story treatments considering the information they have that describes this as victim blaming and also portrays such claims as ultimately serving to deflect attention from the person responsible, drinking alcohol as a narrative device might be left in the story.

In both examples multidimensional saturation is occurring throughout the filmmaking process. Conceptual problems and narrative problems constantly provide these opportunities. We can see saturation happen when the students try to solve them. When they isolate moments, situations and or dialogue to explore, the students are analyzing key points of the prevention education material. They are not simply receiving information they are putting it into play and seeing how it works in real-time or imagined time. We think this is effective precisely because the investigation is in pursuit of another objective - a resolution to a narrative or conceptual problem - the film process. In a way their reception and absorption of the sexual violence prevention material is lateral (as apposed to direct) – A change in mental representation is not seen or experienced as a cultural challenge because it exists as an object in the scene - accepted as part of a sensible universe the same way any prop or character on the set is materially verifiable. As this material is also used as a tool for helping to move the narrative is a demonstration to the accepted truth-value of the sexual violence prevention material.

The REEL Talk ACT OUT program works with 'at-risk' youth populations, definitions vary from 'troubled teens who are hard to control' to the whole youth culture that is beset upon by any number of negative environmental and social factors including, economics, race, single-parent families (gendered social norms) and drug-abuse which could influence their ability to finish high school. At-risk for not finishing high school is often used as a short-hand definition for 'at-risk youth.' We focus on how they learn (partly described above) and how they can affect social change through the combination and the integration of creativity, education, and social consciousness.

We want to talk about creativity because it's such an integral part of our programming and because it moves all over compared to the paths of education and social justice whose paths seem to progress in a direction. So, we have to ask how creativity moves with education and social conscious and ask, 'Is creativity inherently positive?'

In *Human Motivation*, Robert E. Franken defines creativity as, “the tendency to generate or recognize ideas, alternatives, or possibilities that may be useful in solving problems, communicating with others, and entertaining ourselves and others.”<sup>i</sup> In a very broad sense creativity can only be positive but what does *positive* ask of creativity in the social sense?

In a collaborative process the filmmaking team must engage in collective creativity to produce an effective film. The president of Walt Disney Animation Studios and Pixar Animation Studios, Edwin Catmull, Ph.D., says, “successful creative organizations, empower members of the creative team, create a peer culture, free up communication, craft a learning environment, get the most out of post-mortems” (question the finished product - ask what could be done differently if given the chance to do over).<sup>ii</sup> All of these characteristics are present and valued in the REEL Talk: ACT OUT prevention film program. Our prevention film projects must involve social creativity: the interaction of individual and environmental resources that are expressed in solving social problems.

In “An empirical Study of the Construct Validity of Social Creativity,” Christophe Mouchiroud and Aurore Bernoussi have eliminated ‘antisocial’ events and inventions from their definition of social creativity in order to maintain an “ethical dimension to creative behavior.”<sup>iii</sup> So, developments such as nuclear weapons or Neo-liberalism might be considered novel and (to some) necessary, their negative effects cannot be disputed and carry an obvious violent component. The authors suggest that, in terms of development, the emergence of creative behaviors can lead to positive social change but do not specifically explain why the lack of creativity might lead to aggressive behavior. However, there are clues in their breakdown of predictors for social creativity. Although, all these domains are important, Mouchiroud & Bernoussi stress that they do not all have to be present in equal amounts for social creativity to occur – social creativity is marked by the interaction of cognitive, conative, affective, environmental variables.

*Cognition: Mechanics* - The cognitive process involved with fluid intelligence like “selecting and encoding social cues.” Memory plays a big part in the evaluation of social contexts, which aids in the generation of adaptive behaviors. (We see this as similar, and as a possible next step after, a conceptual shift.) They cite a study that found aggressive children tend to assess their social contexts on fewer social cues than non-aggressive children. The assertion is that crucial information is not being maintained in memory during the interactive process. Early socialization influences such cognitive distortions. Related to this, we see some members idealize aggression – in spite of sexual violence prevention advocacy in the spirit of their storyboard or script. We recognize this as an opportunity for intervention as part of our discussion about the emergence of social norms. The ability to encode social cues is a critical skill in script development, writing and imagining different social dynamics and consequences increase the chance to build empathy. Decentration, the ability to see from and consider others’ perspectives, is a prominent skill that filmmakers develop which also leads to empathy. Social creativity depends greatly on divergent thinking – the ability to generate multiple solutions when challenged with a social situation – increases the likelihood of novel response and works closely with convergent thinking which helps bring organization and structure to the decision process. This is how we brainstorm trying to decide the next film project and or solve narrative problems.

*Pragmatics* - involves the integration of information stored and selected in mechanics. This can be combined with ‘knowledge of social scripts’ and social norms to encourage creative behavior. Storyboarding, script development, brainstorming can be useful in gaining and storing ‘social knowledge’ as in the exploration of social cues enacted within various constructions of social landscapes.

Conation: a tendency, striving, to be impelled or directed to act. The mental process that directs behavior and action. Mouchiroud & Bernoussi emphasize that certain cognitive 'styles' support, along with conation, social creativity. It is not clear which cognitive style, for example, field dependency or field independency more favorably combines with personality traits such as, perseverance, tolerance for ambiguity and risk-taking to lead to creative behavior. Collaborative projects like filmmaking and loosely affiliated (stylistically diverse) creative communities can employ both field dependant and field independent cognitive styles of their members in socially creative efforts. Although, Mouchiroud & Bernoussi assert that environmental factors, particularly, flexible, nurturing parenting style promotes social creativity in children, some studies show that unsupportive and underprivileged families present obstacles to overcome enhancing the potential for creative children. To explain this contradiction they assign the emergence of at-risk creative individuals to the category of *historical creativity* – Historically creative people have somehow altered our representation of a particular social structure. (*Historical creativity* is contrasted against *psychological creativity* – the construction of adaptive social strategies that are new to the self and yet transferable to others.) This explanation may also reveal that historically creative individuals that come from at-risk environments might only be visible from a retrospective view. At-risk youth may also develop field independent features in their cognitive styles due to their developmental environment. However, since socialization is so important to survival for at-risk youth they have developed what we sometimes refer to as lateral socialization (associated with lateral learning) – social bonds that are maintained symbolically and without formal acknowledgement, marked by loose affinity.

Affect: Both negative and positive affects influence the creative process. Empathy can be generated by negative affects possibly leading to raising consciousness about social problems such as sexual violence. Joy or surprise, positive emotions, can influence new approaches to solving problems. These emotions are employed consistently as narrative devices in our filmmaking program. We think that since the spectrum of emotions can be fictionalized, made plastic and exteriorized by the filmmaking apparatus they can be effectively combined with actual emotions and other domains of expression to produce socially creative acts.

Good intentions are not enough to safely and responsibly do a sexual violence film prevention program but conation can be the foundation on which other domains of social creativity are learned and applied instead of simply uncovered as predictors. That is, the desire to act (conation) is often that first step from where the other domains of social creativity (cognition and affect) are sought or in the case of environmental variables, negotiated and not overdetermined. Intentionality is important to primary prevention because if people can want to change their conditioning, they are more likely be receptive to contravening forms of information and seek out environments / communities that support their conceptual shift. Additionally, the five conative stages show how consistent conation is with other domains of social creativity: 1. Perception – openness to multiple forms of sensory and intuitive stimuli and the ability to perceive relationships and flow among phenomena, 2. Focus – ability to distinguish certain stimuli or pattern from the background. This aids in establishing goals, 3. Engagement – developing action plan, 4. Involvement – level of which depends on previous stages, 5. Transcendence – complete immersion in the task to the degree that mind/body/task become one. This can also be called *peak experience* or *flow*.

At-risk youth communities employ creativity as a survival tool, a protective factor. As we discussed earlier they form complex social bonds with ambiguous membership. They also participate in styles of expression that can be labeled as 'anti-social.' We have to confront this implicit connection and ask if 'at-risk' youth are marked 'antisocial' precisely to inhibit their movement, their social reach? - In this

sense, do we challenge their social efficacy and consequently, their ability to create meaning, to identify and question negative social norms? Antisocial, as Mouchiroud and Bernoussi use it is not the same as difference or alterity, which I would associate with at-risk youth cultures.

If we think of ‘style of expression’ as just that *style*, then the universe of images (signs), sounds, movement and ideas is neutral until discrete elements are chosen, combined and ‘activated’ on behalf of some force. For our purposes, that force is the advancement of sexual violence prevention (on all levels of the social ecological model) through social creativity.

Let’s end with transcendence, one of the most powerful experiences and thresholds of youth development (especially for disadvantaged youth) because it elicits feelings of belonging and purpose. Also, it is important to point out that transcendence cannot be filled with itself (It can’t be a memory or an exact replica of itself). As development occurs, socially [creative programs](#) (and human creative development) demand more of the other domains of creativity to reach transcendence. Transcendence creates cognitive complexity, cognitive desire – it wants outside the self, [outside itself](#) because it cannot be replicated within its previous conditions which have become too small (move from external locus of control). So, development moves to the social, to the civic (internal locus of control) – creativity becomes, despite any feign to the contrary, ethical.

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<sup>i</sup> Robert E. Franken, (1994). *Human Motivation*, 3rd edition, by. Belmont, CA:Brooks/Cole Publishing Co.

<sup>ii</sup> Catmull, E. (2008). How Pixar fosters collective creativity, *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from Internet on June 2, 2010 from <http://hbr.org/2008/09/how-pixar-fosters-collective-creativity/ar/1>.

<sup>iii</sup> Mouchiroud, C., & Bernoussi, A. (2007). An empirical study of the construct validity of social creativity. *Learning and Individual Difference*, doi:10.1016/j.lindif.2007.11.008. Retrieved from Internet on June 2, 2010 from <http://www.creatique.fr/articles/mouchiroud.pdf>.

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