

ABUNDANT IMAGINATION

A Case Study in Fostering Creativity

Photos by Andi Wolfe, unless otherwise noted.

Lynne Yamaguchi

Do you think you're creative? Studies show that for most folks, the answer is no. Yet, creative thinking is an innate human trait, essential to our species' survival: it is how we solve problems, large or small, that don't have a fixed or known solution. As children, we explored that potential through imagination and play. Do you remember playing pretend as a child? Remember the lives you imagined for your stuffed animals, dolls, action figures, and toy trucks, cars, and trains? Remember being able to create and populate whole worlds in your mind?

For most of us, school marked a decline in our creativity. Since at least the Industrial Revolution, American education has emphasized analytical thinking and information retention. As our days became about memorizing facts and formulas and learning the single correct answer to any question, the muscles we used to think creatively began to atrophy. With exercise and practice, however, we can build those muscles and develop and strengthen those skills.

An event I attended last year at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, the Women in Turning (WIT) eXchange, showed this principle in action. Thirty-nine women spent three-and-a-half days working in assigned groups to create pieces inspired by two words. Each assigned group blindly drew two word tiles—a noun and a modifier—and brainstormed separately and together to see what their two words inspired. The next day, each group created an object that expressed that inspiration. For a full recap of the event, see my February 2019 *AW* article, "Upstairs

Creativity *n.* The ability to transcend traditional ideas, rules, patterns, relationships, or the like, and to create meaningful new ideas, forms, methods, interpretations, etc.

Reciprocation: The 2018 Women in Turning eXchange" (vol 34, no 1).

The eXchange succeeded beyond the hopes of the organizers and participants. Everyone I spoke to returned home excited, inspired, and emboldened with new skills, strategies, ideas, and a sense of momentum. I still feel that energy, and it has led me deep into a study of the many ways creativity can be awakened and fostered.

Fostering creativity

From the beginning, the WIT committee wanted the eXchange to be "a collaborative event open to all levels of experience and focused on process, not product." Rather than a hierarchical mini-symposium, with expert demonstrators teaching less-experienced turners, they wanted "an exchange of information, ideas, techniques, process, friendship, and support." After many long discussions, they arrived at a structure intended to foster creativity and collaboration.

The fact that this structure was based on small-group collaboration meant that the participants had to confront some challenging fears: of vulnerability, exposure, failure, not fitting in, being judged as inadequate. Fear is a major obstacle to creativity: to be creative, we have to be willing to take risks. In just showing up, we demonstrated this willingness. We came ready to engage with the unknown, committed to the process, and thus primed for what was to come.

Many aspects of the Arrowmont setting supported the focus on creativity. First, it is a place removed from everyone's daily routine and responsibilities, freeing us to be fully present. Second, it is a place devoted to art-making, with resources at every turn, art on display all around, and a palpable creative energy. Third, it offers contact with nature: trees, fresh air, animals, grounds to walk, and nourishing, wholesome food. Fourth, sharing living space, work space, and meals fosters a sense of community and play.

Using random words as the inspiration for creation was itself inspired. Whether Jean LeGwin knew it or not when she came up with the strategy, incorporating chance—a random word—into the process is an established creativity technique for provoking fresh associations that may lead to new ideas. Using not just one but two unrelated words forced us to make novel connections, promoting the lateral thinking (also known as divergent thinking) that is key to creativity. Furthermore, the words weren't entirely random but were chosen for their "juiciness," their interpretive richness: as Jean put it, "vague enough, with multiple meanings."

For those who want to generate their own word lists, Elizabeth Amigo culled the words as follows: The nouns comprised mostly abstract terms (*enthusiasm, imagination, generosity*). Nouns that did convey physical things, such as *scenery, symbol, or wilderness*, had to also have other less-physical ▶

meanings. The chosen adjectives could describe both physical and non-physical objects (*fragile, shallow, inspiring, magnificent*). Adjectives applicable only to physical objects (*brown, tall, dead*) did not make the list.

The timing of the word-pair selection was crucial to the strategy's success. Selecting our words the night before starting our projects allowed time for the words to "marinate." Each of us could use that time to more deeply clarify the meaning of the words, to immerse ourselves in those meanings, to make more associations and generate more ideas (more always being better in creative thinking). We also took breaks from the intensive ideation process, and incubation is an important strategy for overcoming creative blocks. The first night, for example, I had so many ideas popping up after I lay down that I finally left the light on and took my notebook to bed so I wouldn't have to keep getting up.

We were given express permission to succeed, as any outcome (or none) was a win. No group had to produce a finished piece. The emphasis was on process, exploration, and experimentation, and we were repeatedly reminded that we were making "sketches, not museum-quality pieces." This helped us suspend judgment of our ideas and their execution, another essential requirement for creativity.

Other factors in creativity

Limits can foster creativity. Besides the obvious constraint of the word pairs at the eXchange, time and materials were limited. We had some flexibility with the latter, but having just one day to make our pieces really turned the heat up; it forced us to be flexible and improvise, which are also characteristic of creative thinking. Paradoxically, the constraints were freeing: they freed us from the potential paralysis of having too many options.

Collaboration is a terrific way to facilitate the development of our creative skills. Creativity depends in part on breadth of knowledge, and working

with others multiplies the knowledge and potential associations we can access. In the case of the eXchange, participants came with diverse backgrounds, perspectives, interests, knowledge, and skills. Being assigned to groups, rather than choosing our own, exposed us to new people with new ways of thinking, being, and making.

Other factors, too, contribute to the fostering of creativity. The spirit of play and humor that pervaded the eXchange, for example, was pure fuel. A good mood and a certain level of distraction also enhance creativity. Doing the eXchange over three days, with three projects, tripled the opportunities for us to work with new people and try new things and allowed our confidence to build exponentially.

Closing thoughts

Exercising and strengthening your creative thinking can begin with just two steps. First, become curious about everything. Learn new things. The more you know, the more divergent associations you have to draw on. Second, challenge assumptions, beginning with your own. Why should wood always remain "natural"? Why not add color or carving or decoration? What you think is the one "right" way to do something may be just a step toward discovery.

Too many of us mistakenly believe creativity is rare and in the realm of a chosen few. If, instead, we view creativity as an open approach to problem-solving, we can see its many forms—small improvements to or adaptations of existing ideas, combination or synthesis of ideas, application of established ideas to new uses, new perspectives on old ideas, revolutionary new ideas—and the range of our own potential. ■

For more on WIT and its 2019 eXchange event, visit tiny.cc/WIT.

Lynne Yamaguchi has developed a day-long workshop designed to spark creativity. Email her at myturn@lynneyamaguchi.com for more information.

A PEEK INTO THE CREATIVE PROCESS

The following case studies—actual examples of WIT eXchange projects—offer insights into the creative process.



Artistic Community:
Sally Ault, Joan Busby, Lou Kinsey

We brainstormed and decided our words could relate to our weekend in many ways. We were a community of women artists, and we were at Arrowmont, an ever-changing community of artists where there happen to reside two totem poles previously created by groups of woodturners.

We decided to make a totem. To include other artists' hands, we used only wood we dug from the scrap bin—shaped pieces that makers of other projects had discarded. We designed the totem together but then each made different sections.

Lou's hut represents a community gathering place and sits on curved pieces, showing how different elements (or people) can fit together in harmony. Sally found some bark on the ground for the roof. Boat-shaped parts serve as pointers to show how artists can be successful in many directions. Joan made a woman at a lathe, with a bowl being turned to represent our WIT community. Sally made a small sandblasted and burned bowl that we filled with shavings from many different groups' projects, adding a wonderful curved scrap as a flame coming out of the bowl to light the way for other artists.



Curving Adventure: Marie Anderson, Joan Busby, Laura Schindler

After drawing our words, we jotted down ideas independently, then came together to plan our project. We realized we were on our *adventure*, learning new things, and that this would be our concept. After sleeping on it, we ultimately settled on making a deconstructed piece with various disks on which we could practice the embellishing techniques we were all interested in learning.

Laura and Joan made disks, while Marie used the modeling station in the wood shop to figure out how to deconstruct a bowl/platter/ring into a platform with a curving track for the disks to stand on. We added another dimension of curves and undulations by making the disks in three different sizes.

Once the track was rough-turned, we met again to determine if the disks would stand up correctly. Then Marie cut the platform into pieces and sanded the edges so the pieces would fit together smoothly. For the disks, we didn't focus on having perfect finishes, just learning the embellishing techniques so we could build upon them back in our home shops.

Pointed Flavor: Lynne Yamaguchi, Anne Ogg, Cathy Peters



We met in the morning after mulling over our word pair overnight. All of us focused most on the taste (rather than the metaphorical) aspect of *pointed flavor*: e.g., tanginess, bitterness, spiciness, poison. We all loved the idea of lemons and especially of concealing the "pointiness" of their tart flavor by making boxes of the lemons. So we ended up each making a lemon-shaped box lined with jagged "teeth." Cathy and Lynne used rotary carving tools to dimple the skin and make the points; Anne burned the teeth, adding another element of color. We were surprised at how much the finished interiors resemble those of juiced lemons, a case of art unintentionally imitating life.

Bumpy Generosity: Margaret Lospinuso, Julie Schmidt, Leslie Ravey

The idea for our piece was a team effort, arriving as a nearly complete idea in one of those exhilarating meetings when a spark hits imagination and ideas flow quickly. It was night, and we were in the mountains and aware of the stars. The word *generosity* evoked the awesomeness of the heavens with its billions of stars. But the first word was *bumpy*. That led a team member to observe that the universe is bumpy and that black holes exemplify this bumpiness. But we didn't have a shape. Another team member pulled out her phone and searched for images of black holes, and we all realized that an artist's rendering of a black hole was exactly the right starting point.



Photo: Courtesy NASA/JPL-Caltech



We had some creative fun designing a presentation that made the three of us out to be prize-winning astrophysicists. After all, what other teams would be able to work Einstein, relativity, Heisenberg, quantum theory, and redshift into a four-minute presentation? We were being asked to pretend we were genius turners capable of creating art in a single day, so why not embody that outrageous pretense in our presentation?

Neglected Friendship: Dawn Herndon-Charles, Ettasue Long, Adrienne Lobel

The words *neglected friendship* seemed so depressing that we wanted to trade for a new adjective but were convinced otherwise.



Brainstorming on the word *friend*, Ettasue came upon the idea of sweets. It felt perfect, a concept we could represent. We also wanted to incorporate a positive element, not just portray sadness for a neglected friendship, so, although sweets could also be positive, we chose healthy foods—vegetables—as a counter.

We realized early on that we needed to agree on a scale to have the individual components come together as a whole. Therefore, we checked in frequently with each other. We also had rules: we should each try something new, push our comfort zones a little, and, most of all, have fun.

One challenge was to project the idea of *neglect*. We thought about dusting the cake with sawdust, but that seemed messy. And we considered trying to depict mold. But then Ettasue saw some cotton batting: spiderwebs!

Robust Enthusiasm: Pat Reddemann, Ann Mellina, Teresa (Arrowmont intern)

After sitting individually with our words overnight, we met at breakfast to discuss what to do. Thinking of *robust*, we eventually settled on the idea of forest, particularly that which surrounds Arrowmont. Parts of the property had been destroyed by a forest fire, and we could see that both the forest and Arrowmont were rebounding and robust.

We turned three bowls, each representing a stage of the fire and regrowth. The bottom bowl was scorched and carved to represent the fire, and it holds the next bowl, which displays seed images. Last came the bowl featuring pinecone designs. Each bowl contains items from the forest: pinecones, seeds, and dirt. The final piece, a hollowed tube containing an actual pine branch, represents the forest's enthusiastic growth.

