Abstract

During my time as an elementary school teacher, the students in the classroom were given a significant degree of agency, autonomy, and voice in how they went about their learning process. In this choice-based democratic learning environment, the students gravitated towards self-initiated creative engagement and chose to employ creativity as a central function of their learning process. The daily creative rituals which the students enacted fostered feelings of well-being and at the same time opened up additional creative pathways (Rufo, 2016). These findings reflect the research literature that shows children who feel comfortable and safe in a classroom environment engage more deeply and meaningfully in academic content (Gude, 2010; Nickerson, 1999; Richards, 2010). Furthermore, according to Wright (2015), the affective filter “refers to factors, such as fear, anxiety, shyness, and lack of motivation” (p. 319) that can impede learning, whereas, a “safe and enjoyable classroom environment...helps to lower the affective filter” (p. 61). When students in the author’s classroom engaged in creative rituals of their own choosing, it lowered their affective filters which consequently opened up new channels and entry points into their learning (Rufo, 2017). The ritualized creativity of the students was made manifest in...
myriad ways that included drawings, paintings, 3D objects, installations, game design, and the production of short films. This narrative demonstrates how student agency allows members of a classroom community to express their individual and collective voices, while providing ample opportunities to learn in creative, meaningful, and relevant ways.

Figure 1. Cheerio Decorated Laptop
One day in late February I walked back into the classroom after our snack break to find the children sitting at their tables and watching me intently. I sensed they were up to something as I walked to a cart in the
back of the room to retrieve my laptop. When I got there, the classroom erupted with laughter. The children had decorated my laptop by placing Cheerios on the keyboard and trackpad. (Rufo, 2016, p. 178).

I am fascinated by how children create. As an artist, I am inspired by the apparent ease with which they make art using whatever is close at hand, be it a carnation pink Crayola crayon or a clump of dirt. As an educator, I am intrigued by how children readily engage in the acts of painting, drawing, sculpting, or performance to communicate, express, and demonstrate their academic learning, active imaginations, idiosyncratic reveries, and the myriad influences that populate their “visual cultural worlds” (Wilson, 2005, p. 33). My students using cereal as a creative medium, as well as the careful placement (a single Cheerio on each square key, two on the rectangular keys, six on the space bar, and multiple Cheerios on the track pad) reflect the order and simplicity of minimalist art— the use of repetition and commercial products found in Pop art, the satirical wit of artists such as Maurizio Cattelan, and the visual paradoxes created by the Dada and Surrealist’s method of juxtaposing unrelated objects to create states of cognitive dissonance such as when Meret Oppenheimer famously covered a teacup, saucer, and spoon in fur (MoMA, 2023). My students’ unabashed use of cereal and a laptop as creative media demonstrates the forthright, serendipitous, and nimble ways children engage in self-initiated creative actions.

During my nineteen years as a general elementary classroom teacher, I have documented hundreds of images, objects, performances, and productions created by my students, such as the one described in the opening epigraph. The fact that these students felt at liberty to engage in a creative action that involved placing Cheerios on my laptop computer was in part a result of my classroom operating as a “democratic environment where children were empowered through agency, self-governance and ownership of the learning space” (Rufo, 2016, p. 179). In my experience, allowing students this level of freedom in an elementary classroom results in abundant and often unanticipated and surprising creative learning events.

My research practice examines the creativity of children with a special focus on their self-initiated creative artifacts. I define self-initiated artifacts as those creative products and processes that children produce and engage in of their own volition without adult prompting. It is unfortunate, however, that schools function as adult-centric spaces where children have “few choices and little power” ( Mulcahey, 2000, p. 15). Creative students in particular are “too often viewed as defiant” (Johnson, 2023, p. 2); and taking part in self-initiated creative actions in a traditionally run elementary classroom may result in the child being reprimanded (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2010). In fact, during my tenure as an elementary classroom teacher, I have heard faculty, staff, and administrators misjudge the self-initiated creative actions of students as evidence of not paying attention, being off-task, wasting materials, being disrespectful, or simply daydreaming. Because of these presumed infractions, disciplinary action often followed. This negative attitude by instructors toward the self-initiated creative engagement of students in classrooms is found at all levels of the schooling experience, even at the college level.
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For instance, in a course evaluation for an art history class I taught during the Spring 2023 semester, a student anonymously expressed, “This class lets me show my creativity and it’s the only class where I won’t get in trouble for drawing during the lesson” (personal communication, February 24, 2023).

Yet, students persevere in their creative actions and engagement. Even in the strictest educational environments, I have witnessed the determination of children to partake in their own creative processes. Once such experience was when I taught in an elementary school where among other draconian practices, the administration required that the teachers instruct their students to walk single file, in absolute silence, while transitioning from one classroom to another. In this school, the hallways were hung with posters promoting positive messages. However, it appeared that the trite images and platitudinous themes did not resonate with the students; in fact, they seemed to not notice them at all. The only exception was when a student became upset, raced out of the classroom and tore down the posters as they ran through the hallways revealing bits of the bright blue adhesive putty used to hang the posters which remained stuck to the walls. I later recounted a story of what followed in my dissertation:

One day while I was escorting the children to lunch, I noticed a student of mine peel off tiny pieces of adhesive putty that were still attached to the wall and place them in his pocket. I wondered what he planned on doing with the putty. Later that week, when I returned to the classroom after bringing the children to music class, I noticed a tiny blue figure on his desk balanced between his notebook and folder. Upon closer inspection, I could see that it was a charming six-legged creature with a serpentine tail standing erect on its hind legs. (Rufo, 2016, p. 54)

Figure 2. Tiny Blue Creature Made From Adhesive Putty
Two things struck me about this particular self-initiated creative action: that the student was able to make a delightful miniature sculpture from the aftermath of a turbulent situation and that I had not noticed the creative process take place until I saw the statuette displayed on his desk. I was surprised to see his artistic artifact out in the open since making objects in an elementary classroom without the teacher’s permission often led to punitive results causing children to “go to great lengths to protect their creations and hide them from the adults with whom they interacted in school spaces” (Rufo, 2020, p. 7). Because of this need for concealment, I sometimes refer to children’s self-initiated creative artifacts as subterranean objects. This action is one of many demonstrations of the creative resiliency of children I have observed over the years.

The two vignettes described here support the notion that children are naturally drawn to acts of creativity (Dominey, 2021; Wamboldt, 2019) and therefore, as a teacher, I found it fitting to allow my third, fourth, and fifth-grade students to engage in self-initiated creative acts in my classroom throughout the school day. This democratic classroom practice yielded numerous benefits including opportunities for meaningful learning and student voice, as well as student-generated ritualized creative events.

**Ritualized Creative Events**

According to McLaren (1999), students are often “reduced to the role of pure spectators who assimilate knowledge about things rather than...knowledge as lived experience” (p. 119). McLaren argues that this is in large part due to the “symbolic and ritualistic enactment[s]” (p. 138) students are required to perform in classrooms where they become disenfranchised as they are compelled to partake in “ritual scenarios of classroom life” (p. 137). Conversely, I am interested in the ways democratic learning environments encourage student agency. I have found that when given agency, children will engage in actions that over time become ritualized creative events of the children’s own choosing and making. The ritualized creative events my students initiated occurred during three distinct time periods of the school day: morning time, snack time, and instructional time.

**Morning Time Rituals**

Over the past few decades, classrooms have become increasingly restrictive environments with a greater focus on teacher-directed instruction and top-down educational initiatives (Giroux & Schmidt, 2004; Smyth, 2008; Zhao, 2006). In response to this trend, I set aside twenty minutes each morning where my students were free to choose the way they wanted to transition into the school day. During this time, they mingled with friends, played impromptu games, worked on projects, made art, read, and even formed drum circles using percussive instruments fashioned out of miscellaneous items found in the classroom. As their teacher, I considered it essential to be vigilant and attentive during this time as it offered ample opportunity for me to get to know and better understand each of my students. The ways in which they enacted their creative morning rituals revealed a
wealth of information about each student’s personality, interests, and learning styles. The most popular ritualized activity involved drawing and writing messages on the classroom whiteboard.

**The Whiteboard**

When they first arrived in my classroom at the beginning of the school year, the students assumed that the whiteboard was the sole domain of the teacher as this had been the practice in previous grades. Soon, however, they came to find that each member of our classroom community had equal access to the whiteboard. The agreed upon rule was that the students were allowed to write or draw anything they wanted on the whiteboard as long as it was not hurtful to others. The students used the whiteboard as a message center, a place to express themselves, and a way to collaboratively interact via textual and image-based data. For example, in Figure 3 the image on the left side shows the work of a student who wrote an inspirational quote on the board each day in order to “make her classmates feel good” (personal communication, October 24, 2013). The center image shows a division problem containing a 31-digit dividend that the students called, “super long division.” Interestingly, the students who enjoyed creating and then solving the super long division problems were those who initially found the algorithm to be difficult and challenging.

The image on the right shows one way that the student group C.I.A.E.D.T. (Candy is an Everyday Thing) lobbied to have the teacher bring in candy. This group posted Support the C.I.A.E.D.T. flyers around the room and also drafted petitions for students to sign.

![Figure 3. Quotes of the Day, Super Long Division, and Candy Petition](image-url)
Two additional examples of the ways in which students used the whiteboard are shown in Figure 4. The image on the left shows the whiteboard used as a survey instrument asking classmates to place a tally mark under the letter font design they liked the best, while the image on the right shows a dynamic looping, abstraction that covers the full surface of the white board. In these examples one student used the whiteboard as a mode of communication whereas another student used the whiteboard as a mode of expression.

A final example shows how the students used the whiteboard to produce humorous cartoon panels and write uplifting messages for their peers to read (Figure 5). Each of the examples described here demonstrates how the students’ use of the whiteboard as a morning time ritual served to empower and give voice to themselves and their classmates.
**Snack Time Rituals**

Our classroom schedule included a designated snack time. Because of dietary restrictions and food allergy concerns the snack options were limited to dry cereal such as Cheerios and when available, fruits such as apples, bananas, and oranges. In the classroom, a snack table was set up that included paper cups to scoop the cereal out of large plastic bulk-pack bags. Most students would eat the cereal by picking out pieces with their hands or pouring it from the cups directly into their mouths. A few students chose to devise creative ways to eat their snacks including one called the ‘Cheerio Kabob’ and another, the ‘Cheerio Stick Hat’. Other students used the fruit, especially the apples, not only as a healthy snack but also as a medium on which to sculpt.

**The Cheerio Kabob**

When I first met him, Cooper (a pseudonym) did not strike me as a child who liked to create. His no nonsense attitude belied his penchant for imaginative and artistic endeavors. However, during a snack break, I watched as Cooper took a straw and began to carefully string the Cheerios, one by one, over the straw. I continued to observe for a minute or so as he steadily and silently added Cheerios to the straw. Unable to resist, I asked, “So, what are you doing?” Without missing a beat he replied, “Making a Cheerio Kabob” (Figure 6). I followed up with, “Are you going to eat them or is it a design?” Before I could finish the last word of my question he said, “Yes, I’m going to eat them.” He then slid on the final Cheerio, turned, and walked away.

**The Cheerio Stick Hat**

During another snack break I saw a group of students with cups of Cheerios in hand, gathered around Brenda (a pseudonym) and shouting something about a unicorn. As I approached the group, the children giggled and told Brenda to show me her unicorn trick. Brenda said she had made a Cheerio Stick Hat (Figure 6). I was curious to know more, so Brenda told me how she came up with the device. She said she found a stick with a hooked end and placed it in her hair so that the hooked end protruded roughly six inches from her forehead, similar to a unicorn. When I asked her to show me how it worked, Brenda bent her head forward putting the end of the stick into the cup to hook a single Cheerio. She then tilted her head back up, took the Cheerio off of the stick, and popped it into her mouth.
Apple Carvings

Late one afternoon while straightening up the classroom after the children had left for the day, I came upon a small stash of 7 partially eaten apples (Figure 7). It was evident that the ways in which these apples were eaten was not just about consumption but also about the making of ornamental objects as only one in this series reflects the classic apple core shape. The others appear as organic, dysfunctional spinning tops reminiscent of contemporary artist Allan McCollum’s multiple objects from his artwork, Over Ten Thousand Individual Works (Enright, 2001). Carefully, and one might argue exquisitely, crafted with what seems to be a perfect set of incisors, each carving not only serves as the remnants of a healthy snack, but also demonstrates how children are able to effortlessly and innovatively appropriate and adapt any material to fulfill their aesthetic needs and visions.
There were many other ways that the students engaged in creative ritualized actions during snack time in addition to the handful of examples mentioned here. Each one demonstrates the clever and imaginative playfulness in which children will readily and frequently take part, when offered the freedom to do so.

**Instructional Time Rituals**

Although I preferred to teach my lessons using a hands-on constructivist approach, the administration required that for 30 minutes of each day, math be taught via direct instruction focusing on skills the students were required to master by the end of their elementary school experience. Therefore, math class became the most restrictive time of day for my students as they were required to take part in a teacher-directed, rather than discovery-based, lesson with little choice in how they went about their learning. Still, the students found ways to engage in self-initiated creativity. At the beginning of class, some would set up temporary art studios where artwork and academic work happened concurrently. Similar to their morning transition time, the agreed upon protocol was simple and straightforward: students were allowed to create during math class as long as it did not interfere with their learning or distract from the learning of others. As the school year progressed, math class creations became commonplace and were seldom a distraction.

Early in my teaching career, I noticed how elementary-age children prefer to go about their learning in active and creative ways. As soon as I got the opportunity, I exchanged our classroom desks and chairs, for stacking stools, lightweight folding plastic banquet tables, and old butcher-block style tables on sliders that the art room had discarded. I also collected a variety of alternative seating options such as kid-sized benches and large inflatable yoga balls. This combination of furniture made it easy for the students to arrange the classroom to suit their personal learning needs, and as I did not impose assigned seating, they were able to explore and experiment with various work area arrangements.

During the direct instruction portion of our math class, some students simply chose a place to sit and interacted with the lessons in the usual ways; taking notes, answering questions, and working on solutions. Others, however, would first take a few minutes to set up what could be best described as creative work spaces. These work spaces took on a wide variety of forms and purposes; two examples of which will be shared here.

**Creative Work Spaces as Places of Comfort**

Some of the students, especially those for whom mathematics conjured feelings of distress and agitation, would spend the first few minutes of math class setting up arrays of small toys such as zoomorphic erasers or stuffed animals and then throughout the lesson, carefully arrange and rearrange these items while attending to their math work. Although school rules prohibited the children from bringing toys into the classroom, I eventually stopped enforcing this rule because of the benefits gained by those students for whom these items functioned
as transitional objects (Arthen & Madill, 1999). Transitional objects, such as a blanket or teddy bear (McCullough, 2009) are used by very young children to enhance their sense of safety and security (Goldstein et al., 2020).

During my math class, these transitional objects also became prototypical art objects (Thornton, 2014) because of the ways in which the children organized them with an aesthetic deliberateness. In this respect, we find the students also engaging in a form of self-administered art therapy (Rufo, 2017).

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 8. Zoomorphic Eraser and Stuffed Animal Set Up**

**Creative Work Spaces as Mini-Studios**

It was easy for Oscar (a pseudonym) to go unnoticed as he was small for his age, relatively quiet, and largely remained inconspicuous. Oscar was also expert at making subterranean objects; those self-initiated creative artifacts mentioned earlier that children surreptitiously craft and then hide from their teachers so as to not have them confiscated. During the early part of the school year, I stumbled upon a small figurine Oscar had made and inquired as to who created it. Only after someone volunteered Oscar’s name did he admit to being the maker of the artifact. It took a few weeks before Oscar was assured that he would not be punished for making unsolicited artworks in my classroom. Once I had earned his trust, Oscar started to create his artwork in the open. When I asked permission, Oscar also allowed me to photograph his artworks and video record his working process.

During one such encounter as he was manipulating a length of wire with long nose pliers, I asked him what he was making. He said, “it’s going to be a mouse.” As I moved my iPhone near to get a closeup of the process I said, “Tell me if I’m in your way” to which he responded, “You’re in my way.” (personal communication, February 24, 2014).
In a traditional classroom setting, Oscar’s curt response would be considered disrespectful. However, in this type of democratic classroom environment, I did not take it as rude, nor discourteous. Instead, I thought of it simply as a direct answer to a direct question. In the elementary classroom, it is far too easy to assume traditional power structures and what McLaren (1999) describes as the “gratuitous wielding of power on the part of the teacher” (p. 135), where students are expected to submit to the demands of the teacher without question.

Conversely, I am interested in familiarizing myself about the lived experiences of my students so that I can design learning activities that are relevant and meaningful to them. In such an environment, children such as Oscar are free to manifest their creative processes to increasingly greater degrees which in Oscar’s case, eventually led to him assembling mini-studios prior to each lesson. In these temporary creative spaces, Oscar arranged groupings of stools stacked at different heights to act as sort of a desk and credenza set up where he could have both his lesson handouts and artwork within easy reach. He also used small step ladders and benches as places to store works in progress and to hold the supplies he used for both his academic and creative work such as paper, pencils, pens, markers, masking tape, duct tape, paperclips, pushpins, scissors,
folders, and rubber bands. At one point his work became so popular with other students that they commissioned him to create novelties and trinkets for them (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Oscar’s Creative Commissions
Agency, Creativity, and the Affective Domain

By being granted the agency and autonomy to employ creativity as a central function of their learning process, the rituals of traditional schooling practices gave way to rituals that were generated by, and meaningful to, the students. These new creative rituals were instrumental in establishing our classroom as a safe space where the students were able to freely express themselves, offer inspiration to others, and take part in a community wherein each member had equal ownership of the learning environment.

The creative rituals also served to deepen the students’ engagement with their academic learning by appealing to what is referred to as the Affective Domain in Bloom’s Taxonomy of learning domains (Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1973). The affective domain relates to students’ attitudes, feelings, motivations, emotions, and values (Nahl, 1997). Appealing to a student’s affective domain prompts students to become excited about learning. Furthermore, when students are enthusiastic about their classroom experiences they participate to a greater degree, acquire deeper understandings, and have higher self-esteem (Thomas & Arnold, 2011). There is also a reciprocal relationship between attitudes and learning where positive attitudes lead to “greater learning and increased understanding leads to more positive attitudes” (McLeod & Adams, 1989, p. 38). This relationship supports learning as demonstrated when the students used the white board to practice long division or to employ their English Language Arts and communication skills by writing messages. In addition, the creative learning spaces and transitional objects provided ancillary therapeutic benefits to the students by helping to establish a hospitable learning environment and bolster academic confidence.

Transgressing the Status Quo

The pedagogical practices enacted in my classroom empowered students and led to dynamic and meaningful teaching and learning experiences centered on creative innovation. However, when my students engaged in their self-initiated creative acts, they modeled a learning paradigm that contradicted and clashed with the school’s customary practices and structures (Rufo, 2014).

A few years after I left the school, I asked a teacher with whom I worked if she would be willing to share her perspective on the ways in which my classroom was viewed by parents, teachers, and the administration. The positive things she heard about my classroom was “the importance placed on student agency, the way creativity was encouraged, the emphasis on the learning processes over learning products, and the careful consideration of each student’s academic, social and emotional needs within a learning environment that celebrated inquiry, exploration, risk taking, questioning, and problem solving” (Rufo, 2016, p. 351). The critiques she recalled hearing was that my classroom was often loud and did not have enough structure or academic rigor. Still others were of the opinion that “too much play took place” and the students were given an “exorbitant amount of creative
license” (p. 351). She ended with, “Those who loved you were really huge fans. Those who didn’t felt frustrated, confused and angry about what they observed” (personal communication, July 3, 2016).

Perhaps the greatest challenge to establishing democratic classroom practices in traditional schooling environments is helping students navigate those spaces outside the sanctuary of the classroom. For example, as part of an English language arts project, a group of students decided to make a movie and asked me if they could use an unoccupied office a few doors down the hallway from our classroom in which to film one of the scenes. The office was used as a makeshift classroom by a reading specialist on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. As it was a Thursday, I told our students they were allowed to move and adjust the furnishings in the office space as long as, once finished, they put it back the way they found it. As was our practice, both the students and I had walkie-talkies so that we could check in with each other. The office had a front facing window that looked out onto a courtyard as well as a window in the door. A second-grade teacher who was walking by observed my students moving the furniture around and pulling down the shade over the window to adjust the lighting in the room. She entered the office, and without allowing the children to explain, promptly scolded and sent them back to the classroom.

Upon their return, I gathered the class together to have one of our frequent discussions on the expectations and protocol in our classroom versus that of the school at large. One principal I interviewed after she had left the school for a position at another institution described it this way, “you would engage with the kids in a discussion about code switching [and how] the community and code you had created together in your classroom didn’t necessarily apply throughout the school (personal communication, July 20, 2015).

Each classroom is a microcosm of a larger school system with its own established set of principles and practices that classroom teachers are expected to replicate. However, since my classroom routines and conventions privileged student agency and creativity, it was necessary that I help my students understand how to best navigate those spaces inside, and also outside, our classroom.

**Conclusion**

The research literature shows that children who feel comfortable and safe in a classroom environment engage more deeply and meaningfully in academic content (Gude, 2010; Nickerson, 1999; Richards, 2010). The stories I relate here demonstrate how allowing students safe spaces to devise creative rituals of their own helps them grow academically, creatively, emotionally, and socially. Creative agency gives students the ability to express their individual and collective voices, while providing ample opportunities to learn in innovative, meaningful, and relevant ways.
There were numerous challenges to implementing a student-centered approach during my years as an elementary classroom teacher. However, in retrospect, the efforts undertaken to maintain a progressive pedagogy that empowered students were well worth it as these experiences remained with my students over the intervening years. From time to time, in a grocery store or via social media, I will happen upon students I had in the past who are now adults. Our conversations invariably lead to reminiscences about the days when we had a classroom where teaching and learning meant discovering, creating, daydreaming, and playing. One former student in particular later commented:

It was huge to me how open the curriculum was. I sought out colleges with very open curriculums because I always thrived on that model you created and appreciated your willingness to let kids dive deeper into their passions and strengths. On the flip side of that, things I wasn't as good at or interested in became more interesting through a creative approach. (personal communication, April 1, 2024).

This recollection and others like it are confirmation of how teaching and learning approaches rooted in creative contexts positively impact students’ social and emotional connections to their educational experiences and serve to deepen future learning possibilities.


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