

On the Creative Edge

The Artistic Side of One Library

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Libraries can go beyond being places of information to become places of inspiration. Years ago, at the Avon Free Public Library in Connecticut, we began offering creative art for children. These sessions were so successful that a room in the library was redesigned exclusively for creating art. Today, we have one of the first creative art studios located in a public library in the country.

Mentored by the Art Studio at The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in Massachusetts, we introduced Open Art Studio sessions at our library for participants of all ages to freely explore art materials and ideas.

When selected by ALSC to receive the Curiosity Creates grant, we were grateful to design and implement The Creative Edge program. We believe that creative, imaginative, and innovative individuals have a distinct advantage and a decided edge in the twenty-first century. As Albert Einstein observed about himself, “I am enough of the artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.”¹

The success of The Creative Edge program can best be evaluated by the responses of our patrons, and the numbers surprised us all. With 1,430 patron visits recorded for children between the ages of 6 and 14 during the grant period of October to May, this more than doubled the library’s original goal estimate of six hundred visits for this age group. The overall success of the program, however, was reflected in the total number of 4,284 visits of all ages for grant-related programs.

This statistic was astonishing for a relatively small public library with a town population of approximately eighteen thousand.

This included participants in Open Art Studio, Creative Art Grades 1-6, Story Art, yoga-based Stories in Motion, teen art and creativity tables, as well as three family dances and Art Day in May, which filled the library with art, dance, and music programming all day.

Throughout the grant period, we were influenced by the Center for Childhood Creativity research, which defines the critical components of creativity in children “as key developmental characteristics: imagination and originality; flexibility; decision making; communication and self-expression; motivation; collaboration; and action and movement.”²

As the staff designed and carried through programs based on these components, we found ourselves becoming increasingly inspired and daring to innovate. This creative spirit moved through us and then into some unexpected places, including our traditional storytime. To encourage children to express their ideas, we learned to talk less and listen more. We began to incorporate the whole book approach, focusing on the illustrations as well as text.³ We used wordless picture books to inspire children to narrate stories. We also developed a storytime based on mindful movement in which children



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“embody” the story elements (such as trees) by creating their own yoga poses.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has reported that, “Today’s children are spending an average of seven hours a day on entertainment media.”⁴ The paradox of this age of technology and connectivity is that we are at risk of becoming increasingly isolated and disengaged from one another. The AAP has recommended creating “screen-free zones,”⁵ and the Avon Art Studio is such a zone.

Clinical Psychologist Catherine Steiner-Adair, instructor at Harvard Medical School, has written, “The rich complexities of imagination and sensory, social, and emotional interactions . . . go far beyond the simple hunt-and-tap experience of the digital environment.”⁶ She also states, “Lost is the slow-paced hands-on practice that develops small motor skills, dexterity, and eye-hand coordination. The sensory experience that goes with that—the touch and smell and messy fun of play—is gone.”⁷

If excessive technology can be countered in libraries, it will be through alternatives, such as creativity programming with experiences that enable genuine, rather than virtual, connections to occur. An art area is an excellent place to connect with the creative process and to connect with one another.

Located in the Children’s Room, Avon’s Open Art Studio has had up to 127 patron visits in a single day and is one of the most successful programs we’ve ever offered. Patrons have been enthusiastic about the “openness” of the studio, with its high ceiling and arched window.

Art experiences are open-ended by design to enable creative freedom. Some patrons stay just for a while; others work on numerous projects over extended periods of time. Since the studio is open for hours at a time, everyone is free to come and go.

The open art room may be calm and contemplative or charged with excitement and full to capacity. Because the studio is open to all ages, everyone is welcome. Among our most appreciative and joyful participants, were adults brought to the library by FAVARH, an agency that serves individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Art bridges all ages, and spans great distances. Often three generations of the same family create artwork side by side. We have seen patrons from China, Korea, Russia, Eastern Europe, and South America working together. Originating from around the world, first-generation immigrants and their families, who now reside in surrounding communities, meet at the library to share the universal language of art.

Our staff facilitates the creative process by presenting art materials that encourage creative exploration. These include tempera paint, paint pens, paint sticks, oil and chalk pastels, markers, gel crayons, and Model Magic clay. Typically, art materials appropriate for different developmental levels are offered on each of the four tables in the art room. One very low table is

set with toddler crayons. It is exciting when babies draw for the first time in the art studio!

The Open Art Studio can be described by what it is and what it is not. It is not our intention to provide a maker space or to provide passive programming. It is not a classroom for arts and crafts. We do not teach art lessons. Instead, learning is based on child-led exploration. Along the way, the children are free to make imaginative choices, learn from their experiences and mistakes, develop problem-solving skills, resilience, and, ultimately, self-reliance and confidence. As cartoonist Scott Adams said, “Creativity is allowing yourself to make mistakes. Art is knowing which ones to keep.”⁸

Our staff’s experiences with creativity programming have been expansive, humbling, and profound. These insights have caused us to reevaluate much of what we have done in the past and led us to discontinue assembly type crafts with young children at our library. Crafts such as pompom caterpillars, egg carton spiders, and toilet paper roll bugs require following step-by-step instructions that severely restrict creativity. The ability to make choices is essential to the creative process. This is why we do not show examples for young children to copy. When there is no right or wrong response, the possibilities become endless!

The grant funded our staff to take part in a workshop, at The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art, led by Hervé Tullet, the renowned illustrator and author of interactive art books for children. His book *Art Workshops for Children* served as a resource for our creativity programming.⁹ At the Avon Library, the Book Buddies series paired teens with young readers. Each team ended with a group art experience inspired by Tullet’s art games and murals. Word spread quickly about the fun and soon these groups were full to capacity.

Art experiences designed specifically for teens focused on discarded book art. This included watercolor resist, folded book art, and found poetry on the pages. Also, a creativity table set with gel pens, markers, and coloring pages was placed in the teen room. At times, the table featured books and supplies to try methods such as Zentangle, among a variety of other inspiring prompts.¹⁰ The creativity table has now become an integral part of the teen room and will be sustained beyond the period of the grant.

A space to create can be at the center of the library. It is not necessary to have a separate room. Materials do not have to be expensive and it is best to avoid complex art experiences. Simply providing folded paper and markers is an excellent way to begin. Include envelopes, and the “lost art” of designing and sending cards is revived, much to the delight of everyone!

An open-ended art experience, however, can imaginatively go far beyond this. During collage and card-making sessions, children have asked for additional materials so they can develop their own ideas. When staff provided scissors, glue, string, and

tape, the children surprised us with pop-ups, fold-outs, small books, even a working marionette.

Facilitating creativity through art requires in-depth knowledge of a variety of art materials. It is not necessary to have a degree in art or education. It is essential, however, to learn how to speak with children about their art. Practicing this is an art in itself, and it is not easy. Begin by saying less, and listening more. Young children do not need to be taught art lessons. The best learning is led by curiosity and self-guided explorations.

To support this, adults are advised to avoid imposing their own ideas and value judgments, such as comparing, criticizing, or being overly complimentary. Try not to guess what a child has created, instead ask open-ended questions that foster a child's expression, "Tell me about your painting."

Directions in the art area are intentionally kept to a minimum. Simple signs guide the way. One sign advises, "Dress for mess in the art studio." The table inside is invitingly preset with materials and signs such as, "Create a collage with paper shapes," "Design a card," "Make a mask," "Draw with oil pastels on light and dark paper," or "Paint with blue." Additional information is necessary with paint and clay. These signs describe the painting process and age recommendations for clay. We also advise caregivers to be watchful at all times.

While the studio is open, it is necessary to have at least one staff member present in the room. Two may be required at busy times. It is important to be vigilant of the needs of the participants, to assist while not being intrusive. This is a skill that requires learning to balance on a fine line. In a supportive and non-judgmental environment, all creative efforts are honored.

We offer assistance when it is requested, but this is rare. Usually, guidance takes the form of reassurance that the children are free to make their own choices. As a result, they have the chance to experience the exhilaration of creative freedom, followed by the joy of being immersed in a playful and imaginative process and to complete a work of art that is uniquely their own.

Creative art groups at the library have been designed specifically for school-age children. These sessions are guided

but still open-ended. The work of master artists is not copied, but, rather, used to draw inspiration. These sources range from Caldecott Medal illustrations to the endless variety of art throughout time. Inspiration can be prehistoric cave paintings or ancient Egyptian masks. Children can illuminate their initials based on medieval manuscripts while Leonardo Da Vinci's work can inspire children to innovate their own inventions. Children are fascinated by the impossible constructions of M. C. Escher, the playful imaginings of Joan Miró and Marc Chagall, the dense jungles of Henri Rousseau, the surrealism of René Magritte and Salvador Dali, and the delightful paper shapes of Henri Matisse.

Begin to look around in a library, inspiration will be everywhere! 🐉

References

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