

Leisure Education and Creative Thinking

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Abstract: There are two dimensions of creative thinking: a creative “state of mind” and creative “thinking tactics”. The former means clarity of mind which makes people always ready for truth, while the latter points to an effective way of creative thinking. The formation of creative thinking requires a leisurely mindset. Leisure education could help people make the best use of their leisure, let leisure wield a positive influence on creativity cultivation, and eliminate the downside of the current education, thereby rendering people’s efforts to cultivate creative thinking more effectively. The goal of leisure education is to achieve a creative “state of mind” required for creative thinking, while the content and approaches adopted by leisure education could provide inspiration for creative “thinking tactics”. To vigorously expand leisure education will be necessary in this creative age, especially for the cultivation of creative talents.

Keywords: leisure education, creative thinking, “state of mind” and “thinking tactics”

Creativity is the most important driving force that helps upgrade industries and changes the world, and its cultivation has become a crucial topic that must be considered and studied in modern times. Leisure education is helpful for the formation of creative thinking, since it could utilize the strengths of leisure, such as ease, freedom and self-satisfaction, to lead students into a world of creativity with an eased and free mind, and also help them acquire creativity through novel and unique thinking.

The Creative “State of Mind” and Creative “Thinking Tactics” Required by Creative Thinking

Creative thinking is an activity of the mind and the consciousness to

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create new symbols, images and representations that indicate particular ideas, cultures and values (Hu, 2008). During the long human history, it was the utilization of creative thinking that enabled humans to create and develop themselves, and propelled human individuals and societies forward. Karl Marx held that the ability to make tools was the only thing that distinguished man from animals. Ernst Cassirer, however, argued that the ability to use symbols, instead, should mark their difference. But whether tools or symbols, creative thinking is necessary. It is creative thinking that distinguishes man from animals and gives man a creative existence in the universe. Creative thinking, as a mental process to discover and solve problems, provides “the stepping stones to human progress”. On the one hand, creative thinking boosts human individual growth and elevates humanity to a position above animals; on the other hand, the utilization of creative thinking keeps pushing human spiritual and material civilization forward.

There are two dimensions of creative thinking: a creative “state of mind” and creative “thinking tactics”. The former refers to a clarity of mind which allows people to remove the veil from truth through epiphanies or inspirations and see things unfolding into their truest and best selves. Lu You, a poet in the Southern Song Dynasty, once said, “The words are already there; the lucky sometimes stumble upon them”. That also implies that, once entering a creative “state of mind”, people may need no deliberate efforts, but just a little bit of luck combined with a philosophical kind of wisdom to naturally get what they want. Like leisure, a creative “state of mind” is also marked with ease, freedom and self-satisfaction (Pan, 2005) and it sparks one’s creativity and enhances self-fulfillment. With restrictions here and there, humans are never born free, but creative thinking frees them to some measure, allowing them to gallop unbridled in the imaginary world, and in creative mental spheres like literature, the arts or science, all the time with a liberated mind. Only when creative thinking is given freedom will remarkable inventions appear, as those innovations and extraordinary achievements that adorned human history. It is said that many of Einstein’s ideas just popped out when he was walking behind a baby stroller or standing on a bridge waiting for a friend on a rainy day; and Alan Greenspan had his best ideas about economic development when he was taking a bath. Likewise, Chinese literati and artists are also known for the excellent works they improvised when drunk, such as the “hundreds of poems” composed by Li Bai in a stupor and Wang Xizhi’s “Preface to the Poems Collected from the Orchid Pavilion”. Their minds were liberated by the booze.

A creative “thinking tactic”, on the other hand, refers to a specific way of thinking or an approach to solving a problem. It can be well demonstrated by many examples from history, such as Cao Chong’s creative method to weigh the elephant and Sima Guang’s quick wit to smash the vat to rescue his friend. Creative ways of thinking also abound in modern times, such as brainstorming, the tactic used for recognizing the whole through observation of the parts, Fermi’s thinking tactics, the approach of borrowing forces for use, making adjustments when cornered, transcending limitations, and thinking systematically (Yang, 2014). Creative “thinking tactics” have three hallmarks; novelty, diversity and effectiveness. Creative thinking must be a new and unique way of thinking that breaks through stereotypes. When fully utilized, it is supposed to provide myriad answers to a

certain question. Everything in the world is marked with infinite attributes, and creative thinking could identify their multiple dimensions, find multiple solutions to problems, and explore infinite opportunities. What creative thinking tries to do is to select the best option from all the available solutions and to solve a problem more effectively. When one way is blocked, people are encouraged to shift to another direction for their answer and solution to achieve the best results.

The Value of Leisure Education for Creative Thinking

Creative Thinking Cannot Exist without Leisure

Leisure provides a foundation for creative thinking to transcend time and space. The ability to transcend limitations is a fundamental trait of the human mind and also the root cause of its creativity. Creative thinking, as a form of transcendence over reality and stereotypes, can liberate men from both internal and external yokes, invigorate and give full play to their thinking capacities, and thus turn themselves into a work of creativity. Creative thinking can transcend specific circumstances, break through the confinement of time and space, and conceive things and scenes from beyond time and space, just as is reflected in the famous Chinese sayings “The author’s mind is in harmony with the external environment” and “One’s mind can connect to and act together with the things of the world”. Thinking can bring things beyond concrete objects to mind, for example, the happy chirp of birds in the wild may be translated into a pleasant melody, or a melody may materialize into a beautiful story in our mind. It was also owing to thinking’s ability to transcend concrete things that Einstein managed to follow light all the way to space and found new attributes of time and space (Duan, 2002). Such transcendence cannot be realized without leisure providing a foundation in time and space. A man buried in work or trivialities will only focus on things here and now, and how could it be possible for them to see beyond the immediate concerns and unleash their creative thinking? Leisure is an experience of and expression for freedom, and a combination of free time and a free mind. It helps people transcend all tangible and intangible kinds of yokes and covers, be true to themselves, experience in a most natural manner, imagine freely, and go beyond the immediate time, space and things, thereby invigorating their creative thinking. In the free time provided by leisure, people can break away from the regulations and requirements made by concrete affairs, be relatively free from others’ interventions and disturbances, follow and act upon their own will at ease, and become the masters of their own thinking and behavior. Blessed by leisure with a free mind, they can adopt a leisurely mentality, appreciate, discover and create things naturally, joyfully and confidently, employ their imagination to the utmost, and let their thinking transcend the limitations and confinements of reality, thereby preparing themselves in time and space for creative thinking.

Leisure also enriches the spiritual connotation and raises the level of creative thinking. “Creativity as a special activity of the human mind and consciousness refers to the creation of new symbols, representations and images. Those new symbols, representations and images must carry rich thoughts,

cultures and values, or else they will never be considered as true creativity” (Hu, 2008, pp.71-74). True creativity must contain novel and rich thoughts, cultures and value. Leisure, by injecting man’s subjective elements such as talent, wisdom, thoughts, emotions and wishes into creative thinking, bestows upon creative thinking a new and unique connotation, and thus elevates its level. That is also why Josef Pieper held in his philosophy that the core of leisure should be pursuing a quiet and profound life. “If lacking in leisure, humanity will only end up as a slave to work, fettered to a narrow world from which they can never escape. Without leisure, there will be no chance for thinking or any birth of culture” (Pieper, 2005, p. 7). Only in leisure can men become free souls, draw on the best parts of knowledge and culture freely, and cheerfully and create. Johan Huizinga once said that those who were playing games were the freest, truest and most creative people. What he called “those who are playing games” referred to people in leisure, the most creative group. Leisure releases them from all kinds of covers and confinements, and enables them to fully assimilate and learn the best parts of knowledge and culture, and display their true talents and wisdom to the utmost. Meanwhile, it becomes possible for them to fully utilize their own power and initiative, find their way into the truth of the world, understand the truth, achieve their subjective goal in their own manner, and display their own style, taste and level, just as the two poems authored by two famous Confucian scholars in the Song Dynasty indicated. The poems, which read, “Leisure appeased all of my stress and anxieties, and I slept until the window was lit by the rosy morning sunshine. A sober observation will reveal all things at their ease, and they are feeling the seasons just like us people” (by Cheng Hao) and “There lies a glassy oblong pool, where light and shade pursue their course. How could it be so clear and cool? For fresh water comes from the source” (by Zhu Xi), are a vivid reflection of how leisure provides a leisurely state of mind and refreshing inspiration for creativity.

The Drawbacks of the Current Education that Hamper the Development of Creative Thinking

The human brain is home to countless neurons, which are connected by routes full of possibilities. As the world emerges and expands in human consciousness, the human brain also finds a world of reflections, in which pieces of information will follow their particular routes, and reach and gather in the center of the brain, until a vivid picture of “thinking” is formed. The information favors familiar routes and always sets out for a familiar destination. Meanwhile, those unchosen routes become deserted. A human thinking model is thus formulated. After that, man begins to realize that, whenever they are trying to find a new way of thinking, they will face a strong sort of resistance. So, what exactly is hampering creative thinking? Wang Wenge pointed out that “Creativity is an exploitation of knowledge and experience, without which creativity will never happen; on the other hand, however, the already-existing knowledge and experience also represses creativity and keeps the human mind from deviating” (Wang, 2013, p. 24). But in truth, knowledge and experience is neutral in itself and is far from being repressive. Possibly, instead, it is the model of learning that should be responsible for the repression, and the biggest obstacle for creative thinking is perhaps the current model of education.

Professor Zhao Yong from Michigan State University in the US once remarked that “An innovation-driven society must be made up of innovative members. Innovative talents can never be born in schools which only force students to recite standard answers for exams, or award and punish students in proportion to how well they can ‘regurgitate’ the knowledge crammed into their minds” (Zhao, 2010, p. 2). Education should be a process to lift veils, reveal the true self to people, help them improve themselves and achieve an ideal state free from covers, and let them freely utilize their thinking power to create and realize their own value. The current education, however, deviates from that. It is harmful for people’s imaginations and creativity and hampers their creative thinking. By habitually cramming into students’ mind the so-called “only” correct and useful kinds of knowledge and experiences, and then using exams as a weapon to force students to remember them, the current education places students in the same mold, but never encourages students to explore, think for themselves, imagine, discover the colorfulness of the world, exploit their infinite potential, and pursue their unique and truest self. For example, in family education parents tend to choose for their children, and schools use uniform, standard exams as a tool to score students and measure their performance. That is repressing creative thinking. The education gets shrouded in its instrumental value and deviates from its man-oriented foundation. In that manner all things beyond the instrumental value are obscured, including the possibilities for new discoveries or inventions.

The Creative Value of Leisure Education

How should leisure be understood and utilized so that it could better exert a positive influence on creative thinking? How should the drawbacks of the current education and the tethers to thinking be eradicated? Leisure education could be an innovative answer. Charles Brightbill, a US scholar studying leisure education, defined leisure education as an education on the purpose of things beyond work and other activities to sustain livelihoods, and held that leisure education could let people gain self-satisfaction by formally or informally learning to use their free time, bring their talent into full play, and thus make free time playing a role in improving the overall quality of their lives (Brightbill, 2009). On the one hand, leisure education provides people with the basic knowledge and skills they need for a leisurely life, helps them to exploit their talent, and improves the quality of their lives; on the other hand, and what is more important, leisure education gradually brings the meaning and value of leisure and living to people, makes them understand themselves and their relationship with the world, and helps them “add a dimension of value to their existence and build a ‘world of meaning’ and a spiritual haven peculiar to humans” (Liu, 2008, p. 148).

Leisure education allows people to make better use of their leisure time to let leisure enhance their creative thinking. Undoubtedly leisure places people in a free, relaxed and joyful mental state that is ready for enjoyment and self-development. However, it does not mean that people can transform leisure into a good state of mind simply by following their natural instincts. Not everyone can enjoy leisure in a smart way. Many people have free time yet do not know how to use it, while many dream of leisure yet never get a chance to experience it. In both cases the positive role and value of leisure

will be largely hampered, whereby creative thinking becomes barely possible. To use leisure in a healthy, appropriate and smart way, one needs education. Leisure education, aimed at “helping people understand leisure and themselves, utilize leisure, live a leisurely life and realize their own value,” featuring the “cultivation of people’s awareness of leisure, the ability to choose leisure activities, and leisure-related knowledge and skills” in content, allowing people to clearly understand and use leisure in a productive manner, letting life itself blossom in leisure, and helping people move towards a true and ideal self. Only through leisure education can the circumstances around leisure be fully leveraged, creative thinking sparked, and the spiritual connotations of creative thinking be enriched.

Leisure education, by leading people to their truest selves and freeing their minds for exploration, can eradicate the drawbacks of the current education’s pursuit for instrumental value, and break through all kinds of confinement brought by inertial thinking. “The truth about and the meaning of one’s life lie in the self he identifies with” (Feng, 2004, p. 21). The truest self of a person is his fundamental, truest state of existence. The meaning and value of his existence must be revealed by his real living. But, one’s true self is often obscured. Living in a society of complexity, many people have to wear a mask to hide their real thoughts, yield to reality, and block the way to their true selves, thus becoming “aliens” living a “passive” existence (Pan, 2017). Only in leisure can people disarm themselves, get rid of the yokes, and return to their true selves. Leisure does not ask people to escape the modern world like a cynic. Instead, it offers a way back home. In leisure everyone has a chance to find their true self and become better and happier (Goodale & Godbey, 2000). Leisure education leads people to their leisurely, or true, self. It enables people to continuously overcome inevitable limitations, transcend themselves according to an ideal standard, and insist on realizing the goal of freeing humanity itself and letting it return to its truest self. Therefore, leisure education is truly an education that aims to lead people to their truest self. In this process, people can proceed from their true self, get rid of all kinds of yokes and covers, liberate their minds, and give their thoughts free play.

Leisure education encourages truly free exploration. The nature of leisure is freedom, and any attempt to get close to it will bring people closer to a liberated self, a self free of dependence and tethers. Any activity that is free, unbridled, and not repressed is leisurely. To engage in a leisurely activity means that one can act as a free soul and choose as he likes during the activity (Godbey, 2000). A self in leisure is in its ideal and free state. Therefore, a person in leisure is in fact a complete being who is true to himself and lives in a free, ideal state. Zhang Chao from the Qing Dynasty once said, “Leisure is the nicest thing for men, not because idleness appeals to them, but because in leisure they can read, travel, make friends, drink or write. Is there anything more fun in the world?” (Zhang, 2016, p. 144). In leisure people are free to dabble in things they like, explore the unknown, have fun, and improve themselves in a well-rounded manner. The process is a truly free exploration decided and propelled by one’s true self and committed to the improvement of humanity. Leisure education helps people gain true recreation and experience true freedom, encourages them to explore in freedom and try things they truly like that are decided by their true self, liberates people’s mind and lives, leads

them to a free self, and enables them to use free thinking to feel, explore the world and then create.

Such values are suggested for leisure education: The education should be aimed at human self-understanding and self-improvement, be conducted based on people's true selves, ask people to learn things they like rather than those that are forced on them, and not to learn just because others think something is useful; people are supposed to freely explore the unknown world with joy and curiosity, enjoy and leverage leisure, liberate their minds, shatter tethers, liberate their thinking, transcend the immediate time, space and concrete things, fully utilize the power of their true selves and their initiative, bring their talents and wisdom into full play, and depend on their own thoughts, emotions and wishes to invigorate creative thinking, thereby enabling themselves to create and realize their own value, enrich their lives and find the meaning of their life.

The Goal of Leisure Education

The Goal of Leisure Education is to Provide a Creative “State of Mind”.

The goal of leisure education is to help people feel satisfied in leisure and find their life meaningful (Brightbill, 2009). It enables them to understand themselves, be a true and free self, and utilize and enjoy freedom, guides them to improve all kinds of capacities in freedom, create and realize their own value, and establish a world of meaning for their lives, thereby fully presenting a creative “state of mind”.

Leisure education helps people understand themselves, shatter yokes and become a true and free self, and cultivates in them a creative “state of mind” for creative thinking.

Freedom, as one of the basic meanings of one's living, represents the realization of its true self, and leisure offers freedom a broad stage. However, though leisure offers free choices and potential opportunities, it also creates hidden troubles. The choices people make are closely linked with the quality of their leisure and then the quality of their lives. Only by making the correct choices can people find their true, free self, and fully utilize and enjoy freedom, or else they will end up as slaves to freedom and get lost in the freedom. Therefore, leisure education must be launched. Leisure education is truly an education that aims to lead people to their truest self and encourages free exploration. In it people can get a full understanding of a true, or leisurely, self, find their true and free self, and become a complete person. Meanwhile, leisure education reveals the up and down sides of freedom and guides people to make correct choices, namely that it allows people to be free and independent to choose those behaviors they are inherently called to and they themselves find necessary and meaningful, whereby they can avoid the abuse of freedom and its negative repercussions, and be prevented from becoming slaves to freedom and losing their true self. Leisure education can teach people what freedom is and how they should utilize and enjoy it and help them make correct choices. What is called “freedom” here is in fact a free “state of mind” for creative thinking. It is also an essential attribute of creative thinking.

Leisure education guides people to excite their energy in leisure and enhance their creativity and cultivates in people a creative “state of mind”.

Leisure offers myriad possibilities to people, through which they can engage themselves in various activities based on their interest, and in this process invigorate their fundamental capacities such as imagination, executive ability and creativity. Leisure education views leisure as a chance to learn, allows to cultivate people’s good taste, interest, skills and values, and is helpful for the improvement of their behavior. It enables people to enjoy a creative, inspiring, adventurous, consummate life (Brightbill, 2009). Through leisure education people can learn scientific ideas about leisure, improve their ability to choose leisure activities, and enrich their leisure-related knowledge and skills. That will then allow people to put what they learn about leisure into practice, expand their field of attempts, and better excite their potential.

Leisure education enables people to better understand and unleash themselves and aims for the self-fulfillment of a creative “state of mind”.

Leisure does not only mean a natural, eased and free state, but it also refers to an ideal state of self-fulfillment and self-satisfaction. Only in leisure can people remove their mask, shatter yokes, return to their true self, and realize their potential. Self-realization is not an inborn talent, but an outcome of education. One of the greatest goals of education is to help people realize their potential (Brightbill, 2009). Leisure education, aimed at leading people to their true self, allows people to choose their leisure activities consciously rather than blindly follow others. It helps people find their true self and cultivates a keen perception in them (Brightbill, 2009). It encourages people to keep liberating themselves and always return to their true self and sets that as its ultimate goal. It is in this process that creative thinking is invigorated, and people turn themselves into a work of creativity and achieve self-fulfillment.

The Content of Leisure Education is Aimed at Providing Inspiration for the Creative “Thinking Tactics”.

In terms of its content and approaches, leisure education guides people to utilize leisure in a productive, clear-minded and intelligent way, and cultivates in them an awareness of leisure, an ability to choose leisure activities, and leisure-related knowledge and skills, thereby enabling people to see leisure through a new lens, identify diverse recreation means, make an appropriate choice, better lead a leisurely life, and achieve better outcomes. Then it provides effective inspiration for the creative “thinking tactics”.

Leisure education cultivates scientific ideas about leisure among the public, enables them to see leisure from a new angle, and inspires a new way of looking at the creative “thinking tactics”.

People have long held several misunderstandings about leisure. For example, some equate leisure with rest and relaxation, squandering away free time passively and blindly; some confuse leisure with indulgence in pleasures and idleness even to the extent that they render their life meaningless and see

their soul distorted; some see leisure as mere consumption and an opportunity to show off, stripping leisure of all its spiritual value; some consider leisure as a terrible opponent to work. It is the goal of leisure education to cultivate scientific ideas about leisure among the public, correct their former misunderstandings, and help them acquire the correct understanding about the nature of leisure. Leisure is never simple relaxation, meaningless indulgence or a formidable opponent to work. Instead, it is an opportunity for people to be liberated from external stress, have fun, enjoy freedom and improve themselves. Only when leisure is scientifically treated can it be correctly utilized, controlled and developed into a form of wealth, thereby building a new spiritual haven for creative thinking and offering a new perspective. Traditional proverbs like “God helps those who help themselves” and “With time, iron bars can be ground into needles” may not work here. Instead, in today’s context, diligence does not always herald success and play is not necessarily an evil. Only at ease and in leisure can people perceive their inner thoughts, from which creativity may pour out (Pan, 2017).

Leisure education improves people’s ability to choose leisure activities, brings them to a wide range of recreational means, in which they can select the one that best suits them, whereby diverse “thinking tactics” can be sparked for their creative thinking.

Based on one’s interest, expectation and strengths, the ability to choose leisure activities means individuals’ capacity to have an independent and free choice in their recreation so long as they are morally appropriate and helpful for their self-development. It includes people’s capacity to utilize time, their aesthetic abilities and capability to choose for themselves. Given the diversity of the means of recreation, their combination could yield myriad possibilities. What leisure education does is help people find those diverse recreation means and then select those creative ones that best serve their purpose and ideals. The real meaning of freedom is that one can always try and become free to choose and decide all the details of a leisure activity (Mundy & Odum, 1989). Therefore, the most important thing for people to do is understand themselves and their deepest needs, and be free to choose a recreation they really like. Only interest, the strongest driving force for creativity, can inspire diverse or even infinite possibilities of creativity.

Leisure education, by increasing people’s leisure-related knowledge and skills, can make leisure more productive and thus enhance creative “thinking tactics”.

Without certain leisure-related knowledge and skills, some leisure activities may turn out to be less fun. The satisfaction people gain from any activity is inseparable from the increase of their knowledge and skills. Whether it is cooking, boating, playing golf, writing poetry, collecting antiques or playing bridge, all those leisure activities are, without exception, enriched as people’s knowledge and skills are improved (Goodale & Godbey, 2000). Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi proposed the concept of “flow” to define the optimal experience people attain at work or in leisure. It means a surge of elation people feel at the moment of self-fulfillment. The “flow” experience requires that an activity should never be more difficult than one can afford. It is undoubtedly an optimal mental state for a creative person. Creativity is a combination of knowledge and action. Without necessary skills, one may aim high yet accomplish little, and his creativity may flounder due to the lack of tactics. Therefore, only

by mastering leisure-related knowledge and skills through leisure education can people fully utilize freedom, effect creativity and enhance its role.

The goal of leisure education is to help people “feel satisfied in leisure and find their life meaningful”, and enable them to understand themselves, be a true and free self, and utilize and enjoy freedom. Leisure guides them to improve all kinds of capacities in freedom, create and realize their own value, and establish a world of meaning for their living, thereby fully presenting a creative “state of mind”; in terms of its content and approaches, leisure education helps cultivate an awareness of leisure, an ability to choose leisure activities, and thus develop leisure-related knowledge and skills, thereby enabling people to see leisure through a new lens, identify diverse recreations, make appropriate choices, better lead a leisurely life and achieve better outcomes to provide effective inspiration for the creative “thinking tactics”. Leisure education is a new approach to cultivating creative thinking that especially should be promoted in this age of creativity.

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(Translator: Xu Qingtong; Editor: Yan Yuting)

This paper has been translated and reprinted from *Journal of Zhejiang University (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, No. 2, 2019, pp. 168–176.