

Power Up!

Technology and the Illusion of Creativity

Can educators be lulled into a false impression that they have been developing creativity in students when using technologies that produce brilliant-looking results?

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Are you artistic? Nah, I can't draw a straight line. Like me, you may have wondered what being able to draw a straight line has to do with being artistic. Well, it depends on what we mean by the term *artistic*. Almost everyone can use paper and pencil to draw a house. Some of these efforts will result in crude squares with a triangle roof, rectangles for windows and a door, and perhaps a chimney with a curlicue of smoke. At the other end of the artistic ability scale, the results will be drawings with shading, perspective, and texture, suitable for a real estate agent's website.

The difference in the drawings lies in the level of craftsmanship displayed. The skillful artist can draw a straight line, at least when a straight line is needed. And the value of craftsmanship, in art as in other endeavors, should not be discounted. Most of us want our lab technicians, airline pilots, electricians, and accountants to be skilled craftspeople—"in-the-box" thinkers whose skills reflect the best practices of their professions.

But today, with technology making it increasingly possible to automate and outsource craftsmanship, educators need to think about how we can encourage that more personal component of art (and of high accomplishment in other endeavors): *creativity*.

Is It Creativity, or Just Nifty Technology?

Nearly every list of 21st century skills mentions creativity as important to success, even survival. Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* (Basic Books, 2002) and Daniel

Pink's *A Whole New Mind* (Riverhead, 2004) point to creativity as not just a nice extra for those working in the arts or entertainment, but a career and college readiness skill for all.

We may believe that technology is helping students become more creative. After all, aren't we seeing even our youngest students use applications and websites to produce visually stunning products? But it's not necessarily so.

Consider the image in Figure 1. It took under a minute and no thought whatsoever to paste the text from this "Power Up" column into the free online program Wordle (www.wordle.net). The website then generated the cloud. It looks pretty classy, and readers unfamiliar with Wordle may assume I am a talented, creative person. I can "create" similar professional-looking graphics using dozens of



online tools—poster makers, cartoon creators, avatar builders, infographic generators, and so on. When making a slide show, I can use the clip art, styles, and templates that come with PowerPoint and find thousands more online. Stock photos relieve me of the task of taking relevant photographs to illustrate concepts.

Here's the question I've been asking myself: When technology enables a person to make something that looks professional without having to master any degree of craft, does that increase or decrease the likelihood of creativity? And can educators be lulled into a false impression that they have been developing creativity in students when using technologies that produce brilliant-looking results? Does my Wordle cloud give only the illusion of creativity?

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