Transactional Analysis of the Creative Process

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Teachers of the creative process understand intuitively that different types of students need different types of teaching. The art students who splash paint with abandon over miles of canvas but have no interest in craftsmanship or self-evaluation need a different sort of intervention than the young artists who are so bullied by their own self-criticism that they can hardly bear to make a mark. The music students who by dint of excessive practice produce music-box accuracy--completely without fire--need a different sort of help than their sloppy but passionate colleagues. Our task as instructors is to understand our students' needs and to design experiences that will help them master their chosen arts, whether these be visual, written, dramatic, musical, or outside of the traditional boundaries of "the creative arts." But our job does not stop there. We must also see that, when they leave us, *they* understand their own needs and have some conceptual frame for continuing to challenge themselves and improve *under their own discipline*. A modified version of *Transactional Analysis*, because of its relevance and simplicity, can provide just such a system.

Transactional Analysis, the understanding of human interaction that grew out of Berne's 1964 work, is a simplified neo-Freudian approach to human personality. It was enormously influential in psychotherapeutic praxis of its time and left its mark on American thinking in the form of the psychological construct the *Inner Child*,

popular to this day. TA is no longer trendy in the self-help or therapy literature, but it provides an excellent paradigm for teaching college students about the appropriate interaction of creative playfulness, technical skill, and self-criticism in creative endeavors.

Berne's scheme is based on three intra-psychic systems, called *ego states*: Child, Adult, and Parent, loosely analogous to Freud's id, ego, and super-ego. The Child ego state is the natural uncontrolled and untutored energy of a child to explore, move, express itself, and instantly gratify its biological urges. Spontaneity, creativity, and liveliness are rooted in this ego state, as are selfishness, impatience, and other less charming characteristics of the immature human. The Adult ego state grows out of the child s increasing contact with the world as he or she develops reality-based skills and learns to manipulate things and events. A person's ever-growing *how-to* knowledge comprises the contents of the Adult. The Parent ego state comprises of neurological "recordings" of the pronouncements and behaviors of a person's parents and other early caregivers. Because so much parenting is oriented towards accepting or rejecting specific behaviors, the content of the Parent ego state is largely evaluative and judgmental, although the judgments may equally well carry the sweet flavor of approval or the bitter tang of condemnation. Berne saw the personality in terms of interactions between all three of these phenomenological states. He represented them visually as a three-tiered stack of contiguous circles.

In the classroom or workshop, the same simple schema can be used to explain how different parts of the personality produce free-flowing creativity, possess technical competence garnered from previous experiences, and are capable of evaluation and self-criticism. Just as the Child, Adult, and Parent ego states work together to enable a spontaneous, effective, and self-controlled personality, so the Creator, Technician, and Critic must collaborate in the creative endeavor. Each is important.

PARENT		CRITIC
ADULT		TECHNICIAN
CHILD		CREATOR
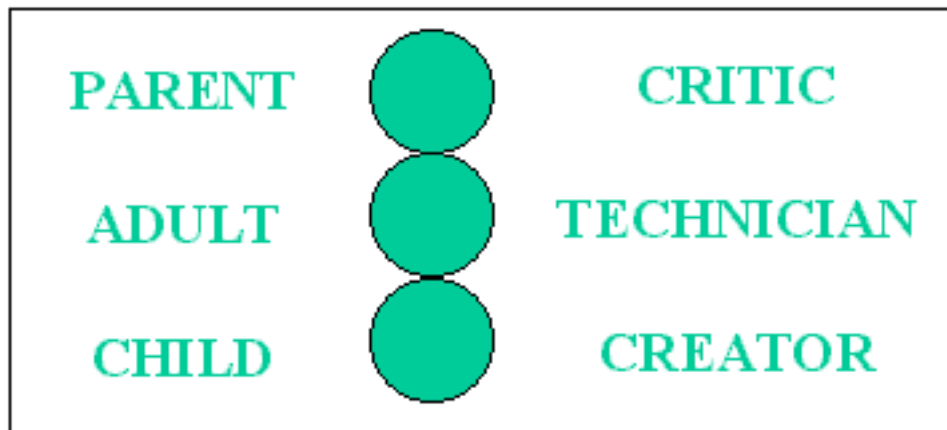
This schema clarifies for students various disorders of the creative process. For example, the unbridled Creator (unserved by a competent Technician and a rigorous Critic) will bring to the table a product that is free-flowing, but undisciplined and ineffective. The pure Technician, not in the service of a free Creator and a rigorous Critic, will bring a sterile but highly dexterous product. The premature Critic, preoccupied from the beginning with how good or bad the product is, will have trouble producing anything at all and will probably ask a lot of frustrated questions about creative block.

The schema can guide instructors, and students themselves, to the intervention appropriate to their problem. Identifying where the imbalance exists (creative flow, technical competence, or critical rigor), and whether it is a deficiency or an excess, will go a long way towards defining the intervention that is needed. For instance, in a writing classroom, the logorrhea of the uncontrolled Creator will benefit from grammatical drills and work on proofreading, but these approaches will do nothing for the writer blocked at the drafting stage by a premature or unrealistic Critic. The student with the over-active Critic may have a grandiosely positive or punitively negative self-assessment. This student may need the help of peer feedback to establish realistic standards for his or her own work. A different but related problem may occur when the Critic chimes in with an evaluation of the creation before it is even drafted, demolishing the student s ability to compose with ease and spontaneity. The writer with the juiceless but technically correct product needs guidance in how to connect that valuable competence to passion, how to put craft at the service of something he or she really cares about. Once students understand that this is a problem of timing, that their self-

critical skills are valuable but must be employed after the Creator has been allowed to play fearlessly with the act of composition, then they can begin to learn the tricks (such as rapid, timed freewriting) that can give creativity free rein.

The schema can be applied in many types of creative classrooms at many levels of expertise. Freshman classes are able to understand and to relate to the theory, and advanced graduate workshops have found it useful. It can help both students and instructors grasp that the creative process will only bear fruit when a free Creator is served by a competent Technician and a rigorous, clear-eyed Critic with appropriate standards.

Reference

Berne, E. (1964). *Games People Play*. New York: Grove.