

Can We Learn To Be Creative? by Scott Ligon

If you are simply competent but unoriginal, you can be replaced by anyone in the world who is equally competent and willing to work cheaper. Value in the workplace comes from creativity.

Composited Reality from Scott Ligon's upcoming short film Figure/Ground

What is creativity?

This is the Encyclopedia Britannica definition: "Ability to produce something new through imaginative skill, whether a new solution to a problem, a new method or device, or a new artistic object or form. The term generally refers to a richness of ideas and originality of thinking."

That sounds about right. So if we agree with this definition, creativity is an "ability" as well as a "process" or "method". If it's an ability, is it something people are born with? Are some people born with more creativity than others? If so, that doesn't seem like the whole picture.

Think of all the stories of athletes who grew up skinny or sickly and worked so incredibly hard and so incredibly effectively that they not only caught up to everybody else, but kept on going until they were much, much better at their chosen field than those who may have been born with greater physical advantage. In business, you will find lots of stories of people who grew up in poverty and, in reaction to this, worked hard and effectively to such a degree that they overcompensated for their poverty until they found themselves among the richest people in the world.

Self-Perception

I teach digital art to freshmen at the Cleveland Institute of Art, one of the ten best art schools in the country. All of my students are talented enough and smart enough to do just about anything. The difference, then, will be the work ethic of each student, which is often highly influenced by the way they see themselves. When I get new students every September, they are often away from their parents and family for the first time and those family roles often define the behavior and expectations of each student. Some students will see themselves as the person who always has to do everything perfectly. Some will see themselves as the person who always messes up. Some will see themselves as the person that does enough to get by but little more.

One of the few things in my teaching career that really makes me mad is when an 18 year old student says "I'm not really good at _____" as if it were a permanent characteristic. If a student says "I'm not really good at color" or "I'm not really good at drawing" or "I'm not really good with computers" the truth in it, if there is truth at all, is that they are unfamiliar with (or uninterested in) the subject. From where I stand, I can see so clearly how these kids could do almost ANYTHING with enough hard work and intelligent application. One of my biggest challenges is to try to change students' negative self-perceptions. My ideal would be that each student, when faced with a tremendous challenge, would ASSUME that they will solve the problem. They may not have a clue HOW they will address it, but instead of giving up or doing something half-heartedly they dig in and use their CREATIVITY to answer the question "How can I solve this?" and then keep going until they do. Some students come into the first day of school already having this natural expectation as part of their creative process while others have the opposite expectation. It's my job to try, as much as possible, to make it second nature for students to address and overcome any perceived weaknesses as part of their daily workflow rather than run away from them or feel that they are permanent limitations.

Can Creativity Be Taught?

So creativity has a lot of variables. It is not just being an inborn talent. Can creativity be taught? Can it be learned? I think to some degree it can. I'm certain, also, that it can be cultivated and encouraged to the point where it thrives.

Creativity can also be discouraged. A lot of our current educational system involves students sitting quietly, memorizing and repeating information. Students who are good at this reap the biggest rewards. Students who are creative thinkers might represent a disruption and unwanted distraction from this process. It is, of course, the act of creativity, of insight, of seeing the big picture that defines and gives meaning to all those things that we are required to memorize and repeat in our public schools.

World culture is changing, in large part because of digital technology. As pointed out in Thomas Friedman's book *The World is Flat*, just about anything can be done from anywhere in the world because of our ability to instantaneously transmit files and information through digital means.

If you are simply competent but unoriginal, you can be replaced by anyone in the world who is equally competent and willing to work cheaper. Value in the workplace, then, comes from creativity. A person who is unique, original, distinct and who creates something that is not quite like anything else...and a person who does this WELL . . . is the person that is irreplaceable. This is nearly the opposite paradigm that was active in the 20th century. Who knew that art school might be a PRACTICAL choice?

So I believe that creativity not only CAN be taught (or at least be developed through teaching) but that it is a necessity in the 21st century. Our school system, for the most part, has not caught up with this notion.

The Blurring of Boundaries“There is little illusion today that the images captured by a camera are really the way things look. All the more so when one sees the flash card emerge from the camera and being stuck into a computer, reading all those 0s and 1s with some black box algorithm to reinstate the memory. That is important to remember in freeing oneself to transform the 'original' photograph into a personal vision, whether tending towards photorealism or towards a more painterly effect. These are all illusions. Best to make them compelling rather than holding on to a literal sense of ‘that is what I actually saw.’” – Joe Nalven, Channeling the Creative Flow: 2 Cameras and Photoshop 1960’s poster, modified photography in the pre-digital age.

I heartily agree with Joe Nalven’s statement. George Lucas has said that film has become a painterly medium and I would extend Mr. Lucas’s statement to photography as well.

People will continue to use photography to document reality in important and vital ways. It’s important to realize, though, that digital technology has blurred boundaries to a degree that representation of reality is a choice, not a limitation or characteristic of digital photography. People have always used in-camera settings and darkroom techniques to push photography beyond simple representation of reality but digital technology pushes those possibilities and tendencies into the forefront of the creative process and multiplies them exponentially.

Asking the Wrong Question

From Figure/Ground by Scott Ligon, Clockwise from left: 1. The original video footage, 2. the painted figure separated from background, 3. the background image, 4. the final composite.

My current project, nearly complete is a short film called Figure/Ground about the death of my father. It stars veteran actor Allan Kulakow.

As much as I think about this blurring-of-boundaries stuff and as much as I talk about it, I still found myself trying to categorize the film according to old definitions. “Should it be primarily photographic or should it be primarily animated?” What I meant, actually, was “Should it LOOK photographic or should it LOOK like animation?” In actuality, it was a hybrid regardless of final appearance. I painted on and modified each panel. Many images were composited onto artificially created backgrounds. Even if it LOOKED photographic, I’d be doing something painterly with every frame.

Conversely, if it looked like animation, or painting, it would still be very dependent on the excellent video footage shot by our cinematographer Ian Hinkle.

Finally, I realized that I was asking the wrong question. If I tried to categorize it, I was in danger of forcing the images towards a direction that they didn’t need to go. The real questions, the IMPORTANT questions were “What works?” and “What does the image need to support the work as whole?”

Once I was thinking CREATIVELY enough to ask the right question, the rest was just hard work.

Scott Ligon