

Overcoming Creative Anxiety Through the Process Model

Many of us are baffled by the evolution of an artistic idea. We have an image of someone waking up one morning with this terrific idea and because of his/her technical abilities, makes a painting. We can find this process magical and then become even intimidated. The assumption that the artist conjures up ideas and proceeds to execute them, in effect copying what's in his/her head, keeps us in awe.

This assumption gains further credence by the way many art courses are taught and by the nature of our schooling, in general. We can well imagine, if we have not already had this experience, an art teacher instructing us on how to paint an apple. And we would probably think of that as very elementary, something to “master” before we can “move on” to the next step (probably a mango!). We have this sense of a progression of steps, from mastery of very simple tasks to more and more complex ones. We conceptualize, often tacitly, an apprenticeship model of learning in almost everything we do. We have been taught this way and we easily extend the model to learning in the arts.

And what generally constitutes instruction, according to this model? The instructor will teach us how to do something. That something seems very basic, necessary, and taken for granted. Of course, we need to learn how to paint apples. Does anybody say, “I don't care about apples, I don't eat them, they don't appeal to me?” If someone does, the instructor fixes that individual with a baleful stare and sternly lectures that one cannot paint the “good things” without going through the apple first. With the apprenticeship model, we revel in paying dues. The assumption that most of us make is that the masters have all gone through various technical stages and have now acquired a kind of mystical wisdom – the kind that allows them to transcend the mere mastery of apples and to leap out of bed with a great IDEA.

Many of us are turned off by that heavy climb up Mount Apprentice. We have grown weary of it, having encountered these hills in courses we've taken. But we often chastise ourselves for feeling this way, wondering if we just don't have what it takes to push up such a mountain: we naturally tend to assume that the instructor with the dour look and stern admonitions pushed him/herself. That must make us inferior beings who either lack ability or who can't tough it out -- who can't put up with the humdrum to get to the pot of gold that beckons us if we only attend to that rotten apple!

I've just described the Apprentice Model of Learning. It assumes that technique and talent are necessary, but not sufficient to produce works of art (or get and then be able to execute good ideas). Technique/mastery is the result of hard work and talent. But the ideas themselves are elusive, indescribable – one cannot teach (how to get) them. The model suggests that on a macro level, one learns technique first and then generates ideas at a later point, after much study of others' work. On the other hand, on a micro level (for one individual painting), one gets an idea and then executes it with a set of techniques – i.e., after getting it, one then looks around for the “how to do it.” That is, the doing of a painting, in which the idea precedes the techniques, reverses the learning of how to paint, in which the mastery of techniques precedes the search for ideas.

An alternative is the Process Model. This model posits that various fears block individuals from learning and being creative. Fundamental is the assumption that while ideas may be indescribable in that they seem to come out of nowhere, the process of generating them can be described and even taught. Openness and dealing with one's fears

are seen as the keys to success, augmenting the place of repetitions and drills in a new concept of hard work and commitment.

The split between techniques and ideas is eradicated: one is seen to generate (the need for) the other. This leads to the assumption that ideas are in plentiful supply and that techniques can be mastered concurrent with their expression. Ideas are also seen as malleable rather than fixed: instead of adhering to the goal of faithfully capturing something in one's head, one uses such an image as a point of departure, allowing for interactions with media and technique. Because this model is less familiar, an example will serve to illustrate it.

Some Magic Markers

Essentially, I stumbled onto the Process Model out of total disenchantment with the Apprenticeship approach. But not until I had duly chastised myself as a learning wimp, with no true character and a total lack of interest in the arts. I had no clue that my lack of interest was itself a product of the way I had been taught and the way I anticipated learning.

I started to paint with no intention of doing so. I saw letters on a record cover and they appealed to me. I wanted to copy them because there were some color interactions that struck me. Of course, I knew this was not serious – but I was in a place to have some fun, to do some playing. Even as I judged myself for doing it!

Working with the colored pens led to simple “experiments”. I identified what I could control and what I could not --- I didn't attempt portraiture or landscape drawing because I associated those with school learning and with apprenticeship. I just made simple geometric designs: circles, flowing lines, etc. I discovered that I had more “technique” than I thought if I just moved the pen slowly, finding that pleasurable. I was getting a feel for my hand-eye coordination.

Then, I found the magic marker. I went to an art supply store one day and was dazzled by a profusion of color choices in markers. I indulged myself by buying a lot and began to experiment with them to see how they behaved as a result of systematic investigations of interactions.

My breakthrough, my transition from pure play and experimentation to the process of creating artwork, came from simply noticing that the markers had a certain drying time. By using the broad nib to make a line, letting it dry, and putting another one with the same color next to it, but not overlapping, a thin ridge between them emerged. I liked the way it looked and I could control it. I set out to play around with that effect. In so doing, I stumbled onto a geometric “concept”: shapes enclosed in other shapes. And following that, I started to express the idea of people interacting within an environment (as the shapes inadvertently took on humanoid characteristics). I let the markers guide me, moving quickly from one painting to another under this broad conceptual banner, varying the colors, the environment, and the figures. Ancillary ideas took hold.

What happened illustrates the Process Model. My goal was not to draw a specific image or shape, but merely to play and then discover something – to let myself see what came out and to “go with that.” First came play; then an awareness of what I was playing with (color interaction); then a decision to experiment with it (“what if”); then, out of the experiment, would come errors, problems, or something unexpected. For instance, I

began with a series of lines to show the ridges: not being totally committed to their straightness, I allowed them to bend. Eventually, they generalized to closed forms and that led me to see those as shapes within shapes. The shapes became recognizable, however inadvertently, as figures interacting. When I experienced a shift from executing an experiment to seeing what I had done, following the shapes and forms, I was following the process model.

I felt there were two levels in the realm of ideas. The first was a broad structure – e.g., start with the general idea of shapes within shapes. The second was a more specific concept: human in environments. There was plenty of leeway in either case for a specific painting to emerge, i.e., how the humans would interact with themselves and their environments. Often I would uncover something new in executing the broad idea. For example, I might start with humans in environments and either through a mistake or through an inadvertent decision, discover a new geometric pattern or another marker behavior or a new idea. This would generate another experiment. One technical accident involved a blotter effect: I noticed how some of the marker paint seeped through to a paper placed under the painting and how it in fact could be saturated with marker ink to rub off onto a blank piece placed on top of it. This effect had a mottled quality that in fact suggested different types of environments.

I found a useful tension between shapes and images, that is, between geometric forms (for their own sake) and specific subjects (i.e., heads, bodies, even apples!) I could focus on the shapes in following an experiment or I could focus on the subjects; and I could shift back and forth, focusing first on one and then on the other in rapid succession. The tendency, especially for us steeped in Apprentice philosophy, is to become fixated on subjects and fall into trying to make the painting “come out.” To counteract that, I made a conscious effort to maintain a sense of balance. Most of my experiments got me going with an eye to the geometric forms, but after a while, I began to notice specific subjects almost peripherally. I then would “follow them” by extending them within the limits of my technical ability at the time, and at a certain point, look over what I had done, again from a geometric standpoint, responding to that gestalt. By going back and forth, I maintained a rhythm, a balance, a level of ambiguity and a sense of connectedness (one set of forms becomes a subject: various subjects become interacting shapes). I also developed a sense of waiting and discovery not needing to jump at the first subject or shape I saw, instead letting one really strike me. On another level, I could just feel the marker, making simple movements within the purview of the structure or experiment. Eventually, I would notice something that I liked and would respond to it, either extending it or emphasizing it.

Another facet of this approach is the notion of starting point as arbitrary. That is, I didn't begin with an idea and then start to paint. I started to paint and let the idea evolve, through discovery while shifting focus from shape to subject. I needed a general structure to get me going, but I could arbitrarily decide on it, just as an excuse to begin, to start to engage the marker and the paper. Contrast this with the Apprentice model; there, we tend to act as if we must have a definite idea of where we are going before we start and we must remain committed to it at all times, using our technical development to keep on implementing that commitment. With the Process model, I began anywhere and once in motion, looked for something to strike me, even if it moved me in an unexpected

direction (especially if it did so!). I saw that there is much room for arbitrary maneuvering and randomness in form, until directions appear.

At some point, the internal logic of what I was creating would begin to dominate. Also, at some point, my own internal logic and my ability to read and respond to balances and tensions (arbitrary and definite; shape and subject) would take hold. Here is where the real learning takes place – not in the area of technical expertise, but in the area of awareness, of oneself and of the process. I hope this note makes some useful distinctions for anyone fraught with the same self-doubts and concerns that characterized so much of my own training. Maybe someone reading this can try out the markers and work on following the Process model!!