

A Transformative Creative Holistic Approach to Teaching in the Middle East

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*Before I rise to my defense,
Before I speak in hurt or fear,
Before I build that wall of words,
Tell me, did I really hear?*

Ruth Bebermeyer

Abstract: Creativity and holistic education involves dynamic interplay between generating ideas and making judgment about them. Getting the balance right is critical and as Carl Jung (2009) explains, the creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect alone but by the play instinct, the creative mind plays with the object and thoughts it loves. As mentioned earlier to be creative is a response to the inward thoughts and emotions of a human being, we encourage children in the western world to make hand prints with paint, to colour in the lines and if we realise it or not we are using creativity as a holistic part of their development, by encouraging their creative intelligence; sadly, in the Middle East the idea of creativity is a poverty mindset that has been heavily removed from their culture and creative intelligence and it is this that has destroyed creativity from painting to writing.

Keyword: culture, education, creativity, holistic, intelligence critical

INTRODUCTION

In the Cambridge Dictionary the term Holistic means *dealing with or treating the whole of something or someone and not just a part of the person*. This has to be part of the process of healing for those who have been victims and survivors of war, those who have escaped the trauma and survived emotional abuse in all its ugly forms. Introducing the holistic approach of teaching into the classroom in the Middle East is a positive step in the development of the person as a whole, and as Robinson (2002) writes, there are many misconceptions about creativity, it is not a separate faculty that some people have and others do not. He continues to say that it is a function of intelligence; and we *all have different creative capabilities*. When human intelligence is engaged, creativity is possible and it takes on many forms. The most distinctive feature of a human being is their ability to think; the power of the imagination and symbolic thought where our lives are shaped by the ideas in which we have and the beliefs we hold. The principles of holistic education were framed centuries ago by the great philosophers Plato and Rousseau, and as Campbell (2011) documented, both Plato and Rousseau argued that education had to delve deeper and address multiple dimensions of the individual to create a balance; therefore, if balance is needed then we have to begin by using all our

senses and find an equilibrium within our 'self' to reach this. It has been said that creativity cannot be taught and that only a select few have this special gift, since you are either creative or not, it can be challenged that creativity cannot be taught, I will discuss this point in the holistic approach that creativity is not a special quality that some have and others do not, and that it can indeed be taught and this will be documented in the case studies. To promote creativity, it is essential to understand the main elements and phases of the creative process including;

- The need to be in control of the medium.
- The need to allow oneself time and space to think.
- The importance of the medium chosen for the creative task.
- The need to take risks, play, experiment, and
- The need for critical judgment.

Creativity and holistic education involves dynamic interplay between generating ideas and making judgments about them. Getting the balance right is critical and as Carl Jung (2009) puts it, the creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect alone but by the play instinct, the creative mind plays with the object and thoughts it loves. As mentioned earlier to be creative is a response to the inward thoughts and emotions of a human being, we

encourage children in the western world to make hand prints with paint, to colour in the lines and if we realise it or not we are using creativity as a holistic part of their development, by encouraging their creative intelligence; sadly, in the Middle East the idea of creativity is a poverty mindset that has been heavily removed from their culture and creative intelligence and it is this that has destroyed creativity from painting to writing.

The education system is focused heavily on the professional development and IQ of its society rather than looking at the whole person, and combining this as a positive connection. This has been detrimental to the emotional intelligence within the Middle East and has hindered the capabilities of expression; to safely be able to express how people respond in crisis and day to day functioning by using all of our inward natural creative experiences and as Coleman (2005) writes, when it comes to shaping our decisions and our actions, feelings count every bit as much, and often more than thought; we have gone too far in emphasizing the value of the purely rational, of what IQ measures in human life. In the early 20th century the notion and methods of holistic education were transformative in practices by the teachings of John Dewey and the Progressive movement. However, towards the end of the 20th century, controversy soon surrounded the term holistic as a form of 'New Age' mysticism and the educators were, according to Miller (1997) left over from the 1960s, as romantic, ephemeral elitists from a socio political movement that had no longevity or substance within education. This has been the ideology of some professionals for a long time, and so introducing holistic teaching and creative education in the Middle East, asks the question "what does a holistic approach to creativity mean for practice"? Arguably the process of teaching which Dewey initiated to more recently that of Forbes (2003, Shapiro & Purple, 2005) has now produced a postmodern understanding of education; where the focus is addressing personal transformation of the individual. This has seen a radical change and one that is beginning to reflect the importance of the student's identity, allowing and encouraging students whose work has resulted in the individual concern of their social economic role, rather than simply advancing in their own personal concerns and gains. (R. Miller 2000). Moreover, the key principles, according to Miller that are of significant importance for the role of contemporary holistic education and the student are balance, inclusion and connection. According to Miller, balance creates the correct relationship between each aspect of the person and the whole person, whilst inclusion means to link together all the principles of the teaching to create authentic learning and finally, Miller adds, the role of connection develops the focus of the relationships included in all aspects of the overarching experience. This then defines the role of the humans and other living things; and is the link of holistic education in bringing balance to self and to your world.

In this paper I will be discussing the transformative effects of the holistic approach to teaching in the Middle East, using epistemology as the process in the distinction to knowledge. I will be discussing the possible implications of the holistic paradigm for the future in creative education in the Middle East, beginning with some of the key features of contemporary holistic education, especially as they relate to the transformative approach to teaching in this region. I will collaborate the evidence as case studies and as video footage which will be documented as a part of the new intake of students of UKH. A multimedia presentation and this paper will be submitted to the International Education Conference of the Middle East 2017 /2018.

Methodology of teaching Holistically in Kurdistan

Kurdistan has been in ongoing war and conflict since the 1960's, and this has significantly and ultimately placed the society in a continuous struggle for survival of their basic needs and physical safety. With this in mind, it comes as no surprise that the education and social progress has stagnated, especially since the governing of Saddam Hussein, who came to power in 1968. Hussein literally closed the country to the outside world, forcing the abrupt interaction with the rest of the world, encompassing totalitarian control with fear, war, death and not forgetting the devastating genocidal campaign he initiated against the Kurds during the Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988), where he wiped out entire villages and murdered over 180,000 Kurds and gassed the village of Halabja, murdering its 5000 people with chemical weapons. More recently the onslaught of war and terror with Islamic State Iraq and Syria ISIS (2014) in this country has again had a profound and terrifying outcome for families and those living in the neighboring villages, towns and cities, with conflict in Western Iraq Offensive followed by the capture of Mosul and the Sinjar Massacre. This resulted in the displacement of over 20,000,000 peoples and continues to effect the region with IDP's and refugees arriving daily to find safety in Kurdistan. With all this conflict it comes as no surprise therefore that the emotional state of the country has been hugely effected and the main concern within education has been to simply inform rather than embrace. With new universities being built and teachers from all over the world coming to teach here in this country, education has to shift its perimeters to allow for change and to embrace a future for Kurdistan to be recognized and its students to be the future of this area.

The student in the classroom should not be about the individual merely sitting perfectly still, listening and writing, with no involvement of voice, ideas, debates or opinions; but the involvement of the individual's interaction of the whole self. To encourage the learners in their own thought processes, developing questions, relating ideas, being involved in class discussions and listening to one's peers encourages friendships, confidence and self-esteem, social responsibility, speaking and listening skills

and the opportunity to experience and develop from within into a healthy individual.

This is the creative holistic approach to teaching, and therefore the transformative process with which I am aiming to develop in the Middle Eastern country of Kurdistan, in the city of Erbil. To introduce the holistic process of education to the students in this area is crucial to their wellbeing and their future, the students here have not been given the opportunity to develop their emotional, spiritual and critical thinking as part of their personal development. Holistic education and its methods are helping people to find their medium, to discover their creative strengths and genuine creativity is not only about letting go but of also holding on, as many people are not in touch with their emotions and are quite incapable of expressing their emotions (Robinson 2003).

Middle Eastern students are according to Goulini (2014) lacking in autonomy and the ability to reflect and think critically, and according to Goulini, the Middle Eastern classroom is often characterized as being a passive learning environment consisting of students with educational backgrounds mainly based on lectures and examinations. As a result, students are unfamiliar with project based work, individual learning programs, the ability to search and seek, group work and small scale research which is prevalent in life and in the Western educational establishments.

Subsequently, education in the last few years has witnessed major changes which have affected the outcomes of the students learning pattern, and the education sector in the Kurdistan Region has expanded dramatically in recent years, with the territory's extremely young and rapidly growing population continuing to push for further growth in the overall capacity of the sector. They are however, still being left behind in the emotional wellbeing arena. Many new schools and universities have been formed in this region, however, they have struggled to keep pace with the demands of the teaching system that is being used in the United Kingdom, although the overall system is aspiring to be a resemblance of the education in the UK, it has stayed for most part as a dictated educational system; its focus increasingly highlighting the academic skills and the students being tested in high stake assessments, whilst continuingly ignoring many other aspects of a student's development.

Holistic education is opposing this trend in providing an alternative educational format 'holistic education', which, as noted by Campbell and Simmons (2008) is concerned with cultivating and bringing balance in all dimensions of the individual, including emotional, spiritual, physical, sensory, cognitive, social, and moral. By using and including the creative arts as indicated by Efland, Freedman, and Stuhr (1996) who state that art education should focus on identity formation, finding meaning in interpreting and creating visual images, in promoting awareness of social responsibility and informing of

religious topics. For example, Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel frescos, or the personal spiritual experiences as in the paintings of Frida Kahlo de Riveria's highly symbolic portraits; these examples encourage the balance of holistic education and creativity, it gives the student the ability to research the works of art, explore the meanings behind the pieces and examine how they respond to such art work.

Holistic Education

Holistic education is fairly new in the field of art education, since the arts in education has struggled to gain its correct place in the importance of learning, it has been the seen as the last choice, the 'fluffy' subject for the students who did not know what they wanted to be, or the students who daydreamed, the subject that would never take you anywhere as art is not employable or an actual career choice. The arts including poetry and music are not a separate part of the brain that according to Robinson (2003) lights up in certain people or during particular activities; no arts and science, math and the other 'academic' subjects are all creative. The term creative has for most part been hugely ignored as beneficial within education, moreover the importance of education and being highly educated is no guarantee of your emotional intelligence and as the arts can be a reflection of self and the ability to freely create one's feelings and emotions, the complimentary elements are, for the most part, obvious. According to Parsons (2004), "Self and identity are the words we use for the integration of understanding into a coherent whole...Art has traditionally been associated within this construction..." (p.783) as the artist Edward Hopper famously said "If you could say it in words there would be no reason to paint". To be able to express oneself with creativity when words cannot be formed is crucial to our wellbeing.

Holistic education is therefore a philosophy of education based on the premise that each person can find their identity, meaning, and purpose in life through connections to their self and community, to the natural world, and to humanitarian values such as compassion and peace. The premise of holistic learning is the spiritual self-first. To be able to have fun whilst learning, meditate regularly to focus on the breathing and self-awareness of your feelings is the basic process for healing to begin. In holistic learning the emphasis is on the importance of each part of the person as a whole, their interconnectedness, rather than focusing on just the mental capabilities of the learner.

Holistic education works where everyone understands the concept of the lesson. As the lessons are not structured, rather predefined which enables movement of learning to suit the individual's needs, the facilitator presents the issue and lesson but guides and encourages, rather than actually directs the lesson. The emotional state of the student, as discussed earlier, is fundamental to the outcome and the outcome has to be the priority within education. As a new concept of educating to this region I have a fantastic

opportunity to be a catalyst in the format of change within the Middle Eastern education system. The holistic education is the complete opposite to the formal education that is being taught in the Middle East and UKH, and it has already been challenged by other professionals of its validity and its results. To be able to introduce ‘feelings ‘into the curriculum in a University which is predominantly Muslim, where people do not even hold hands in public or show any emotion is both pioneering and nerve wracking all at the same time.

The Holistic Art Student Support Centre (HASSC).

The HASSC began its life in February 2017, when I arrived as the first ever Artist in Residence. Very quickly it became a hub for the students to use as a place of creativity, a place where conversations could be held in safety and a place to form relationships, developing friendships and learning about themselves in a non-judgmental supportive environment. The culture of Kurdistan is one of conforming, with many controlling parents who do not believe in allowing their young people to have an opinion. This is slowly changing with groups forming for example, ‘Next Phase’, a group of young people to meet and discuss various topics to help them into their future, and this year saw the first ever International Youth Day. To have these groups forming and collaborating their voices and opinions is demonstrative of the future of Kurdistan in a positive new environment.

I now have an assistant who provides mentoring, counselling support and facilitates the class when I am providing 1-1 support to students and clients who have booked to come in to use the bespoke service that is being provided. As part of the service here at UKH, the general public can also facilitate this space by emailing myself or Kate Gaj to book an appointment. This is proving to be really successful and has already seen a lot of individual clients coming to get support and holistic healing.



Information leaflet for The Arts Holistic Student Support Centre.

UNIVERSITY OF KURDISTAN HEWLER

THE ARTS HOLISTIC STUDENT SUPPORT CENTRE

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Miss Catherine Gaj catherine.gaj@ukh.edu.krd

Open 9am-3-30pm daily

The Centre:

The centre here at the University of Kurdistan Hewler, is the first centre of holistic education to be created as part of the university; providing a studio for art and student support available for students, staff and outreach purposes. The centre provides in all areas a holistic provision and education service. Holistic education and learning with support involves the whole self and therefore includes the following parts of the person:

Physical, Emotional, Mental, Spiritual, Relationships between people and groups

The Art Studio:

The art studio is more than just creativity. It is a studio that encompasses student support and delivering bespoke workshops as a holistic approach to healing. We encourage creativity and producing exhibitions of one's own work and group exhibitions. We have art resources for the students and provide technical drawing skills if requested. The therapeutic artist Miss Tracy Fenton has over ten years of experience working in this setting of holistic creative education, is a qualified art teacher and experience of exhibiting personally her own art work, nationally and internationally; and curating exhibitions. Miss Tracy was educated in her field of therapeutic work in the U.K. The studio has been in UKH since March of 2017 and has worked with over 300 students; providing support and workshops to the individual. Miss Tracy also provides 1-1 confidential wellbeing support to the individuals as when required. The Student Support Centre (SSC) has Miss Kate Gaj who offers support to the students; Miss Kate has more than ten years' experience of working with young people in the caring and support sector in the U.K.



Services provided:
An open door policy
Therapeutic art workshops
Mentoring/pastoral care

Advisory service
Relationship support
Health and hygiene
English speaking
Art of meditation
One to one confidential support
Transition from leaving home made easier
Transition from leaving friends to making new friends
Support network
Stress free environment
Group discussions
Helping to confidently work on their presentation skills
Encouraging positive behavior
Engagement and listening skills

Case Studies

Student A

Male
19 years
Kurdish Muslim
Studying Petroleum Engineering

Student A: First attended the studio in March 2017. He was incredibly depressed had no sense of joy. He was angry with the world especially Kurdistan, its people and its involvement in the wars. He spoke a lot about my not understanding the relationships here and the community. He was not angry about my coming here but he could not understand why I would want to leave the peace of my homeland. He truly believed that in the UK we did not suffer from pain, unease, fighting and lack of community; I explained that everywhere on the planet there is unfortunately this kind of behavior, and in the UK we also suffer with unrest. His whole demeanor was one of negativity and complete restlessness. After inviting him back to the studio over the next few weeks he began to engage in the creative sessions and even took part in the classroom discussions. He made friends and started to smile more. He produced some extremely thought provoking art work and he found his style, which was stenciling, cutting and spray paint. He soon experienced how art and creativity can speak when we cannot find the words to use. Within a few weeks his whole personality had changed so much so that even his parents saw a change of his behavior and they actually came into the studio to say thank you for the positive change in their son. His behaviors, self-esteem and confidence had changed so much that the whole family was now happier. Student A has since opened a stall in the local Bazaar selling his art work; he has found happiness within, he goes to the gym and has found happiness physically and he passed all his exams so he found happiness socially. He still comes into the studio, producing great art work and he also encourages others to come in and use the space too.

Student B

Female
22
Persian/Muslim
Telecommunications

Student B: Stood at the door of the studio every day, just looking in. This went on for a couple of weeks and each time I would invite her in, she would say the same thing, “no thank you I’m just looking”. Eventually she walked in and I greeted her as I do all my guests with a hug. Her initial reaction to entering the room was one of shyness. She explained how much she liked art but had never been able to do it as her parents would not allow this. Her body language was shy and her voice very gentle and quiet. Student B came from a very strict family and was concerned with how her family would react if they knew she was in the art room as university meant studying nothing else. She also explained that her family dynamics were that she had two mothers, one brother and her father was very strict, although she had a great relationship with him. Student B became an everyday visitor and shared with us that she had no friends here at UKH and until seeing this space was thinking of leaving as she felt so lonely and isolated. Within a few weeks’ student B was producing the most amazing art work, her natural ability to draw from memory and shade is phenomenal. She unraveled slowly and her personality changed massively. Before coming to the studio she would be really angry with her brother every morning. I discussed ways of dealing this, by not reacting to him, by telling her brother she loved him and would not leave him, these were alternative methods of communication to her brother that would cancel the arguments and improve the relationship. She began to do this and slowly her family life improved and her mother and father recognized this. One-day Student B came into the Centre and I could see instantly that something was wrong. As she came towards me I saw the cut on her head and the bruise on her face but more than that I saw and felt the sadness in her eyes. She sat with me as I held onto her and she cried like a little girl for over an hour, finally she told me what had occurred. Her father had found out that she had been speaking to a boy and he had gone absolutely berserk. He had kicked her in the face and used the butt of his gun to hit her over the head. *With this kind of information in the UK it would automatically be a safeguarding issue, however in this country it does not exist. * She thought she was going to be killed and cried that she was so grateful that he had not killed her. Instead he hurt her physically but the worst pain for her were the words he called her. The pain in Student B did not leave for weeks and as we encouraged her and loved on her, supporting her in the studio it was obvious that she was still hurting. Finally, I approached her and explained that this hurt and bitterness she was carrying was now effecting her

school work, her art work, her sleep, her friendship's, it was eating away at her like a disease and she was so very angry with her dad as he now was acting like nothing had happened. I gently encouraged and walked through this pain with her to get to a place of resolving this emotionally. I then asked student B to write down all the words which her father had called her as it was this that was causing her the most distress. I explained to Student B how to release the words from her mind would give her freedom from the pain. She sat and wrote in Kurdish all the words and filled an A4 sheet of paper. We then placed it in an envelope and set fire to it. The freedom of this experience for student B was instant. Within a few days her smile was back, her relationship with her dad grew stronger and she passed her exams. Holistic education brought this student back to life with the capabilities of dealing with forgiveness, pain and abuse from her father.

***** Safeguarding in the country does not exist. For a professional to not have the correct procedure to disclose this information as we would in the UK, can be at times frustrating however, to disclose this kind of information would truly be catastrophic for the student involved. It could mean death and this is the reason the studio is used so much because it allows them to be safe.**



Students using the studio to be creative, make friendships and become emotionally balanced.



A selection of art work from the studio.

Conclusion

As I began to reflect about my teaching over the last two decades, I questioned my motive behind this career choice. My conclusion came in the process of my memories of school and how I had been taught or not as my memories, recalled. I was encouraged by only a very small number of teachers. The rest, sadly never really understood my emotional state of wellbeing and it is this conclusion that has brought me to the place of teaching holistically as a vocation not a profession. Using the arts as a method of healing and creative education over these years, working with hundreds of students and being involved in their emotional growth has been the highlight of my career and to now be able to introduce holistic education with the arts in Kurdistan is the future of education in the Middle East. Only as we educators/facilitators insist and persist in the changing of education to benefit all areas of the students wellbeing, will we see the change for the future generations entailing:

- Moral and spiritual emphasis in Holistic education is necessary for the emotional welfare and growth of the individual.
- Openness, trust and acceptance of self and others.
- Seeking independence/ connection rather than alienation/independence.
- Social responsibility and democratic principles
- The responsibility rests with the teacher/facilitator to include holistic, spiritual, moral, social, physical, and mental wellbeing. As the teacher is concerned with this, the students will tend to be also.
- Promoting transformative learning through authentic experiences.

Collectively, these emphases must be an integral component of all education environments in Kurdistan to improve the teaching in this country and to support individuals with their emotional experiences along with their intellectual growth. Holistic creative education is

being taught here, it is being caught by the students and staff and it is developing their emotional intelligence and creating a brighter future because they now have an understanding and a platform of opportunity for the exercise of imagination and self-expression. The future of the HASSC is very exciting. I aim to develop my research further and continue with a PhD. There has been a lot of interest already for this service and other establishments are interested in a holistic centre within their schools. This will develop into a consultation service, rather than the original plan of becoming a NGO. I will provide information to set up their centre and training will be provided as part of this service. I have made a short video that can be viewed on the Facebook page, where students and staff speak about their experiences in the studio and I write a blog about my life here as artist in residence. I will be working two days a week in the brand new medical centre that has recently been built, a multimillion pound hospital that is still a part of UKH. My role is to provide holistic healing to patients along with the brand new holistic medical team that has been flown in from America. This is such an exciting new season here in Erbil and to be a part of this pioneering team is incredible. We have a very active Facebook page that is connected to the university website and can be accessed at any time. We have recently partnered with the German Army and we are supporting their soldiers and the Peshmerga (Kurdish Volunteer Army) with holistic education. We have been invited to loan three pieces of the artwork which the students have created to be exhibited in The Bundeswehr Military History Museum, this is such an incredible honor and will forge links between Germany and UKH. I have recently had the privilege of a few articles written and published in a national papers in the UK, which again has highlighted the work here and the benefits of creative education, and finally The Big Issue recently published the story of my being here in Kurdistan and the benefits of holistic education and TheirWorld, a children's charity, republished this article in their journal online on the 8 September 2017.

This journey has been, by far, the most rewarding experience of my career and one that is finally being recognized for the true benefits of Holistic Education.

Press Releases

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Words Are Windows
(or They're Walls)

*I feel so sentenced by your words,
I feel so judged and sent away,
Before I go I've to know,
Is that what you mean to say?*

*Before I rise to my defense,
Before I speak in hurt or fear,
Before I build that wall of words,
Tell me, did I really hear?*

*Words are Windows, or they're walls,
They sentence us, or set us free.
When I speak and when I hear,
Let the love light shine through me.*

*There are things I need to say,
Things that mean so much to me,
If my words don't make me clear,
Will you help me to be free?*

*If I seemed to put you down,
If you felt I didn't care,
Try to listen through my words,
To the feelings that we share.*

*Ruth Bebermeyer
Nonviolent Communication (2003)*