

What Would Dr. E. Paul Torrance Do? A Legacy for Creative Education

Is public education ready to agree that the old traditional ways of teaching and learning and thinking are ready for a long overdue makeover? There is plenty of evidence that radical changes in society and its institutions are demanding new ways of educating. In particular, the world is realizing that rapid and radical changes in human affairs are creating a demand for new kinds of creative, complex thinking and problem solving throughout society. Public education is facing the challenge of providing more creative education at all levels of learning.

The challenge to education of recognizing and developing creative potential in the lives of individuals and in our institutions is daunting but doable. Critical to the expectation for success in efforts at educational change is the administrative, decision-making level of the system. Development of understanding and championing of Creative Studies as an academic requirement in student programs in every discipline depends largely upon the spirit and will of educational leadership.

The question arises: How can we accomplish so demanding a task? The answer, loud and clear, is “Ask Dr. E. Paul Torrance”. Since the death of E. Paul in 2003 the answer will have to come from the vast accumulation of his writing and resources, as well as from the “army” of his students and colleagues who responded actively to the inspiration of his leadership. International Torrance scholars continue to promote his work and to look for opportunities to add Creative Studies to official curricula in Higher Education under the discipline of Educational Psychology. Teacher Education programs with strong attention to Creative Education are in a preferred position to contribute in a major way to establishing a climate for the benefits of the creativity discipline on the part of both teachers and students.

As a student of Dr. Torrance at the University of Minnesota in the mid 60’s and one of the fortunate ones to come under his mentorship, I became aware of the difficulty of raising creative studies to the level of official academic recognition. It seemed that even with his superior record of comprehensive and vigorous research in the field of creativity, acknowledgment of the academic value of his work was not forthcoming at most universities. I wondered about the reason until I finally speculated that the subjective content of some of his work in his writing and with students was not understood or valued by administrative judgment or “the powers that be” to quote Dr. Torrance. And so the contribution of a lifetime of leadership in the studies of creativity in all of its diverse applications went largely unsupported by the standardized traditional establishment.

Readers with a background in education according to Torrance will understand the urge that many Torrance scholars have for promoting his legacy. Readers for whom his work is somewhat unfamiliar can be reminded of the scope of his understanding by a look at the number and titles of his many publications between 1940 and 1995. The list is staggering. It was compiled by Garnet Millar, author of the Torrance biography,

published in 1995 by Ablex Publishing Company with the title “E. Paul Torrance: Creativity Man.” The book includes the listing of the astonishing number of publications by Dr. Torrance of Books, Journal Articles, Research Reports, Manuals and Handbooks, Papers Presented at Conferences, Instructional Materials, Magazine Articles, Tests, Monographs, Research /Articles in Journals, Book Reviews, TV Interviews, Application of Research, Parts of Books, and Contributions to Cooperative Volumes. The total of all of his contributions to the discipline of creativity is ready to serve as a resource for changes in Higher Education curricula, especially for teacher education programs, creative potential, Ed. Psych., and studies of Human Behavior.

If the voluminous record of the Torrance publications on creativity and its applications seems an exaggeration, it must be remembered that Torrance was the most dedicated of scholars, that he worked ceaselessly, took no vacations and had a limited social life. He was totally immersed in his work, but always had time for students. He was rewarded by the intense gratitude and devotion showered on him by everyone who came under his influence. Whether discussing research figures with students in his office or conducting demonstrations of creative thinking and learning in a classroom of enthralled children, his passion for his work and the respect he felt for creative expression and learning were unmistakable.

Probably the most remarkable of the Torrance contributions to education was his development of The Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking, distributed by Scholastic Testing Service in Bensonville, Illinois. Test materials include directions for administering and scoring. There is also a scoring service available. They are available to anyone. Torrance began developing the tests of creative thinking potential during his Minnesota years at the University. They were originally called The Minnesota Tests of Creative Thinking. When he left Minnesota for the University of Georgia, his home state, he changed their title to “The Torrance Tests of Creativity.” Their arrival on the educational scene had a profound effect on programs for gifted children. It would actually be fair to say that use of the Torrance Tests could revolutionize education, especially for the vast variety of special interest and “problem” children.

Until the tests were adopted children who qualified for gifted programs in schools were selected generally on the basis of standardized I.Q. test scores. The Torrance Tests made possible the identification of creative potential in children and youth. It was a dramatic breakthrough for gifted programs which became Programs for Gifted and Creatively Talented, with persuasive tests to provide the identification of those puzzling students who were especially talented but who had been “undiscovered” and often misunderstood in school and at home.. The Torrance Tests have served education in communities all over the world.

Titles of a sampling of Torrance books testify to the broad, comprehensive applications of his creative thinking.: “Constructive Behavior: Stress, Personality, and Mental Health”; “Talent and Education”; “Mentorships”; “Save Tomorrow for the Children”; “The Torrance Kids at Mid-Life”; “Manifesto: A Guide to Developing A Creative

Career”; “Multicultural Mentoring of the Gifted and Talented;” “Why Fly? (A Philosophy of Creativity).”

If there is a favorite in my collection of Torrance books, it would probably be “Why Fly?” At least it is the most used in my Torrance library. “Why Fly?” became required reading for a university graduate course for business communication majors that I taught for a number of years. It would be effective reading for both a review of Torrance teachings or for an introduction to his work for the uninitiated. It would provide a balance between the philosophies and the learning activities that are a trademark of his legacy.

What would Dr. Torrance do in the face of current educational problems and realities? He would simply continue what he had always done. He would share his legacy of works and wisdom and point the way to make the educational experience a lifetime of the learning and practice of the art of creative thinking and behavior for personal development and for the creative integration of a diverse society on its way to a better, more peaceful world.

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