

The PVI CREATE Lab: Igniting a Love of Learning and Teaching

By Kendal J. Askins and Dr. Patricia Pinciotti



Learning should be fun! The best teaching is student-centered, deeply cognitive and social. A change in administration and a strong Professional Development School (PDS) partnership with East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania (ESU) afforded Pleasant Valley Intermediate School (PVI) a unique opportunity to achieve new goals and reimagine learning and teaching. In the summer of 2019, I, the assistant principal, and 10 volunteer teachers met with the CREATE Lab team from ESU. Over the summer, we explored how to add a creative learning space as part of the school building, modeled after the one established at ESU. The room design and set-up incorporated an industrial vibe with various zones for students to gather and work on open-ended activities. Supported by a Crayola *Champion Creatively Alive Children* grant and inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach to learning (Gandini, 2005), the CREATE Lab offers a provocation or big idea as an invitation to learning. The provocation focuses on learning experiences that afford student choice while developing creative confidence and intellectual dispositions including critical thinking, communication, autonomy, resilience, creative processes, knowledge and collaboration (Kelley & Kelley, 2013). The CREATE Lab is a uniquely designed space for both students and teachers that expands learning and teaching experiences beyond the classroom and promotes thinking and working as artists. The CREATE Lab also fosters teacher inquiry through creativity and critical thinking and student engagement through observation, documentation and posing deeper questions about learning and teaching.

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Dr. Patricia Pinciotti is a Professor Emeritus at East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania. As such, she works to expand arts opportunities for students, teachers and education communities. Dr. Pinciotti's work as a consultant, teacher, author and partner in C.R.E.A.T.E labs promotes a creative growth mindset through highly engaging, arts-integrated experiences.

Designing the CREATE Lab

The questions relevant to the design of a CREATE Lab fall into three categories that address the use of materials, tools, and technology to facilitate a creative growth mindset and enhance students' communication through multiple literacies and deepen curriculum connections in a global world.

The *Structural* questions dealt with the overall design and the pragmatics of extending the learning from a classroom setting to an innovative in-person creative space. Teachers have been grappling with how to differentiate their instruction to meet the needs of all students in a structured, manageable way. Designing this creating space shifted the ownership of learning from the teacher to the student. The unique design offered multiple entries into curriculum study at the beginning as inspiration, support and problem posing during, or to demonstrate understanding at the end of a body of work.

On a more *Functional* level we wondered about various ways to engage learners to promote independent curiosities and discoveries through problem posing and solving. We brainstormed ways to create engaging, open-ended experiences within creative zones so students could dig deeper. The zones highlighted a range of creative strategies that could be employed to build connective thinking and innovative ideas grounded in how artists think and work. We explored how students and teachers could document and share individual and group creative processes and products on the school website. Our questions included:

1) What format is best to have students explore? 2) What topics/activities will connect to the



Students explore *Creative Connections* while utilizing collages in both two-dimensional and three-dimensional forms.

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interests of students? **3)** How can we connect the available creative zones to content students are learning in class?

Lastly, there are unique *Aesthetic* opportunities within a CREATE Lab experience that involves gathering information about materials and creative strategies to evoke awareness, perceptual sensitivity, and responsibility. We sought ways to challenge students to connect knowledge to personal experiences in their world and represent their ideas in innovative ways. We wanted teachers and students to examine materials from different perspectives by introducing them to “Creatives,” individuals at various ages, from different cultures, and diverse backgrounds. Questions were: **1)** What “creative individuals” do students interact with daily, that they might not be aware of? **2)** How can we help students connect real-life experiences to the creative process in multiple ways? **3)** How does documentations advance understanding and development from the student and/or teacher perspective?

One of the “Creatives” students were introduced to was a *fashion designer*. Students learned about fashion design, asked questions during a live session and then were able to redesign Santa’s suit. During this session, students learned about how designers use architecture, nature and their everyday surroundings for inspiration. They learned how color and a theme are applied when designing for a fashion show. When students were designing Santa’s suit, they could decide the type of suit they were going to design and later discuss their inspiration. This activity provided many exciting and innovative opportunities for students.

Utilizing the CREATE Lab

The CREATE Lab was introduced to the faculty as a place to extend learning that is done in the classroom. Teachers are often looking for ways to creatively engage students in their learning, but are faced with limited supplies, space, and resources. The CREATE Lab offers creative student-centered opportunities for independent and collaborative learning; while teachers can observe and document how their students learn and work through creative problems.

Throughout the year, teachers found multiple ways to utilize the CREATE Lab to address various curriculum goals. Some teachers used it to teach the lesson, some used it as an extension of a lesson, while others used it as an additional experience to advance social-emotional goals.

One teacher utilized the CREATE Lab to help the students gain a tangible understanding of symbolism. The class had just finished reading the story “Tiger Rising.” Throughout the story, students learned that characters, items and places in the story were also symbolic of other things. As they held this discussion in class, students began to gain a conceptual understanding of symbolism and how the author used symbolism to tell a story. In addition, the teacher took the students to the CREATE Lab



Various stations set up in the CREATE Lab to help students explore *Creative Connections*.

and gave them this task: “During our time in the CREATE Lab today, I want you to create a symbol that represents you.” Students then had the opportunity to build, paint, draw and/or color in any of the material zones to create their personal symbol. This lesson was powerful for various reasons because the teacher was able to learn about her students in multiple capacities. She found out how they would describe themselves, what was important to them, their interests and how they liked to learn. Students also had the opportunity to share their symbols with their classmates, showcasing their individual perspectives and building a sense of community.

Not all classrooms are designed the same way. It is not practical that every classroom is stocked with the supplies necessary to allow creative learning to occur. With PVI having a CREATE Lab, it allows the teachers a space that can be utilized daily to extend learning. Walking into this space allows students to transform their thinking. The design is set up as a creative learning space, not as a classroom space. In addition, the CREATE Lab is a place where students have total control over their learning. They decide what creative zone they work in and for how long. This is a space that is most valuable as a stationary space rather than replicating it throughout all classrooms in the building.

The Impact

The CREATE Lab provides students with an opportunity to explore real-life applications of the content that they are learning in class and develop a repertoire of creative strategies. A creative growth mindset is promoted as students make choices, reimagine their understandings and document and share their learning experience. This is a critical time in fourth- through sixth-grade students’ lives, where they make unconscious decisions about who they are as learners and uncover their strengths and passions. They come to see themselves as team players, collaborating with those with like interests. Students who typically don’t work or interact with others, collaborate in a common

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project Students have shared their enthusiasm for time spent in the CREATE Lab with the following comments:

"I feel glad that I came, and I am proud of my painting."

"It was calming and very, very fun!"

"I felt like a pure artist."

"I liked it because we did new things."

"It was very fun and challenging."

"I loved it and want to come back every day."

"I felt inspiration."

Additionally, teachers and students have the opportunity to integrate and transfer current knowledge and skills in a creative way. One mathematics teacher challenged the students to find "fractions at work" at whichever creative zone they chose. While the students were exploring their zones of interest, they were also looking for how fractions were a part of that zone. At the end of their time in the

CREATE Lab, students must share their findings and final products as part of their reflective process.

The CREATE Lab also offers an everyday space for teachers to bring creativity back into learning. Teachers have begun to shift their thinking to incorporate more of a creative growth mindset, rather than a fixed mindset about learning and teaching. This has resulted in a shift in the school culture. Students have begun to see learning as not only something that is provided to them, but something that they can control. Teachers have begun to shift their approach to strategies used in the classroom on a daily basis. The CREATE Lab has helped teachers continue to cultivate a love of teaching and reignite learning in the school setting. As students are experiencing the CREATE Lab, they are learning 'deeply' together and having fun!

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tremendous responsibility to provide the necessary supports, encouragement and freedom to our teachers as they work to make learning more personal, purposeful and engaging to each child. "DRIVE Days" have been a small, but powerful way to continue fostering curiosity in our

learners and have been an important part of Summitview Elementary's "First Choice" journey!

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Deadline to Submit an Article is December 10, 2021

The Pennsylvania Principals Association is seeking articles for its Winter 2022 issue of *The Pennsylvania Administrator* magazine. This issue does not have a theme, so any education-related articles will be considered by the Editorial Review Board for publication. To submit an article for this issue, please send it to Sheri Thompson at sherit@paprincipals.org by Dec. 10, 2021. Go to www.paprincipals.org/Publications for article specifications.

Please Note: Professional papers/dissertations WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED and will be returned for an immediate rewrite.