

# Communication

## Promoting *Cura Personalis* to Cultivate Creativity

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### Introduction

During my third year as a teaching professor, the Ignatian Mentoring Program provided an intriguing opportunity to pursue my desire to support students in growing their creative confidence. This desire was motivated by my personal journey as a creative person, which was clouded by feelings of inadequacy during my younger years when I felt that my artistic talents were sub-par to my peers who excelled in science or math. Decades later, I discovered through my professional experiences that applying a creative process to problem-solving was beneficial and effective in many applications beyond traditional art forms. My goal is to guide students to discover their own creative potential, and to help them build creative confidence during their college years so they can flourish in their chosen vocation.

When I transitioned from a practitioner to a professor in the fall of 2021, I was somewhat surprised at the number of students who lacked confidence in their creative abilities and seemed averse to taking creative risks. I also observed concerning behaviors related to stress, fatigue, anxiety, depression, and sporadic periods of low engagement among my students. As a parent of two college students, I was aware of the lived experiences of this generation and understood the difficulties they faced in mitigating societal pressures. I became interested in the connection between wellness and creativity. I wondered if the stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic had severely impeded the ability to think creatively... or were there other factors at fault?

### The critical need for creativity

With the advancement of technology and artificial intelligence, the need for creative problem-solving and critical thinking in the workplace has increased. In fact, creativity is one of the most needed skills for employees in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Danao). The rapid pace of change in all employment sectors and in society requires flexibility, adaptability, and a growth mindset that favors innovation and iteration. Many of these qualities are explored through the practice of a creative process.

In his book, *A Whole New Mind*, author Daniel Pink described the “new age” of the 21st century as the “conceptual age” or the “age of creativity.” He states that logical and analytical capabilities are insufficient for today’s complex issues, and that the qualities of “inventiveness, empathy, joyfulness, and meaning” will increasingly determine one’s ability to flourish (3).

When the world was faced with unprecedented challenges from the global pandemic in 2020, an article in the *Harvard Business Review* stated that “we need imagination now more than ever,” suggesting that the best way to prepare for unforeseen circumstances is to create, evolve and exploit mental models to find new paths (Reeves and Fuller).

### Barriers to creativity

While the need for creative thinking has risen to critical importance, today's college students have experienced multiple barriers to creativity. Compared to previous generations, students in Gen Z (born after 1995), have spent more of their developmental years living a sedentary lifestyle with a significant amount of time in front of televisions, computers, tablets and smartphones. Often the "screen time" replaced the activities that previous generations spent socially in interpersonal or group relations, engaged in outdoor activities, or immersed in "hands-on" activities to build, craft, or create. Essentially, children became passive consumers of media and less involved in imaginary, interactive play.

In his book, *The Anxious Generation*, author Jonathan Haidt points to a significant change in the play-based childhood that began to decline in the 1980's, which he states was the result of a "well intentioned and disastrous shift toward overprotecting children and restricting their autonomy in the real world" (7). The restrictions on unsupervised play led to fewer opportunities for children to be curious, explore new situations, and learn how to independently solve problems in their daily lives.

Unfortunately, the U.S. education system has been a deterrent to creativity since the 1990's, with its emphasis on teaching test-specific skills. Through her studies on the increase in test-centric education in the U.S., Dr. Kyung Hee Kim reported that "success defined only by test scores, disregarding individual differences and other endeavors or pursuits, hampers creativity development" (Kim).

Another concerning barrier to creativity is the increase in mental illness among members of Gen Z. Colleges have reported increased rates of depression and anxiety among their students since 2010, which coincides with the advancement and increased use of smartphones and social media applications. "The first generation of Americans who went through puberty with smartphones (and the entire internet) in their hands became more anxious, depressed, self-harming, and suicidal," states Haidt (44). Studies have reported that the average teen spends six to eight hours daily on screen-based leisure activities. This excessive screen time has led to "social deprivation, sleep deprivation, attention fragmentation, and social media addiction" (Haidt, 139-140).

While our society needs more creative thinking, the cultural demands of the 24/7 digital world are draining the capacity of this generation to nurture healthy brains and cultivate creativity. Dr. Kim states that all "children are born curious and unique with an innate capacity for innovations, but their creative attitudes and thoughts can either be nurtured or squashed by their climates at home, in school, and within greater society" (Kim).

### The opportunity

Participation in the Ignatian Mentoring Program provided an optimal opportunity to explore the connection between holistic wellness and creative confidence by aligning my COMM 235 Digital Design course with the Ignatian value of *cura personalis*, or "care of the whole person." The concept has been attributed to the concern that St. Ignatius had for living a balanced life in order to support the Jesuit mission of service. It has been noted that "St. Ignatius encouraged novices in the Society of Jesus to be disciplined about striving for a balance among prayer time, studies, service to the poor, physical activity, social time, and rest" (Ruiz).

For the redesigned COMM 235 Digital Design course, my anticipated outcomes were that students would become more aware of the connection between self-care and their cognitive and creative abilities; and that students would increase their confidence in their ability to think creatively.

## Methods

The student learning outcomes for COMM 235 were revised to incorporate an intentional focus on creativity, as noted below:

- Determine specific practices to enhance and grow creative potential;
- Implement creative problem-solving and ideation methods to develop solutions that align with brand strategies;
- Apply knowledge of design principles through development of digital designs from concept to prototype;
- Increase competency with digital design tools in Adobe Creative Cloud applications and website content management tools.

Since this course is primarily intended for students who are communication majors or minors, (not art or design), the learning outcomes are structured to emphasize the development of ideas for visual communication through digital media, and supported through beginner- to moderate-level training with professional graphic design applications. Students are encouraged to develop original design prototypes to challenge their creative exploration beyond the myriad of widely accessible template-based applications that often restrict creativity with a “cookie-cutter” approach.

To guide the fulfillment of the learning outcomes, teaching methods utilized the framework of the revised Bloom’s taxonomy: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating (Anderson and Krathwohl 67-68). This structure supported greater emphasis on the process of creating with less focus on a finished product.

To support the emphasis on *cura personalis* and creative exploration, specific “creative cultivation” activities were modeled from the practices promoted by author Julia Cameron in her book *The Artist’s Way*. The following methods engaged students in regular practices of reflection, discernment and mindfulness, as described below:

- **Creative Contract** – At the beginning of the semester, students were encouraged to write a personal plan for self-care goals to nurture healthy brains and holistic wellness. The expectation was that students would track their own progress toward their goals and provide updates periodically during the semester. As illustrated in the “word cloud” above in exhibit A, the most common goals were adequate sleep, less screen time, healthy eating, increased exercise, and various forms of spirituality or meditation.
- **Creative Immersions** – Students were encouraged to take weekly “brain breaks” away from screens to refuel creativity by engaging two or more senses in creative exploration. Cameron explains that, “In order to create, we draw from our inner well. Overtapping the well, like overfishing the pond, leaves us with diminished resources. We must become alert enough to consciously replenish our creative resources as we draw on

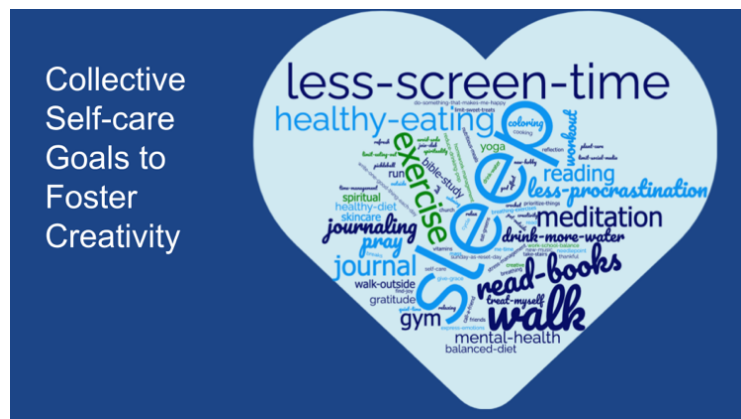


Exhibit A: compilation of students’ self-care goals

them” (Cameron 21). Students were provided with suggestions for on-campus and off-campus experiences such as: nature walks, theatre performances, or visits to museums, concerts or restaurants. A few group activities were promoted during the semester, including a visit to the Weston Art Gallery in downtown Cincinnati, attending Xavier Theatre performances, and an on-campus creative immersion with local artist and Xavier alumnae Holly Schapker. Students visited some of the prominent statues on campus and learned about the artist who created them, and were encouraged to experience the solar eclipse from campus or elsewhere.

- **Reflection & Journaling** – Students were given weekly reflection assignments and were encouraged to utilize sketchbooks (provided through the XU Day One book program) for ongoing journaling, sketching, and other creative exercises. In *The Artist’s Way*, stream-of-consciousness journaling is encouraged daily as a “pathway to a strong and clear sense of self...a trail that we follow into our own interior, where we meet both our own creativity and our creator” (15).

In addition to the activities described above which were completed outside of the classroom, most classes usually began with various “hands-on” creative exercises, such as meditative drawing, creating magazine collages, or sketching concepts for a particular project. These activities were intended to focus the students on the act of mindfully creating, and delay the compulsion to immediately start working on the computer.

The project-based course was structured into five units of three weeks each to allow time for each phase of the creative process: research and planning, ideation and concept development, and application of design technology to develop a digital design asset. The first four units provided students with the opportunities to create a banner graphic, social media graphic, digital brochure, and a blog website. The final unit and course project was left unstructured to allow flexibility for students to choose a project that fulfilled their own interests, or to modify and enhance a previous project. Students determined which design tools and methods they wanted to explore more deeply, and developed a project plan and schedule to manage their creative process. I provided coaching and resources as needed to support students in the planning and implementation of their final projects.

## Outcomes

To track their creative growth over the course of the semester, I conducted three creativity tests with the students during the first, ninth, and thirteenth weeks of the semester. I chose a simplified version of a test that was based on the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (TTCT), a comprehensive set of creativity tests that have been commonly used since the 1960’s. The TTCT tests include figural and verbal activities that are linked to evidence-based characteristics that determine creative abilities. One of the three activities for the TTCT figural test is a “Circles Activity,” which requires participants to fill 36 circles with as many unique ideas as possible within ten minutes. This test measures fluency, defined as the number of creative ideas generated in a fixed amount of time, and flexibility, defined as the variety of different uses derived from a single object (Alabbasi et. al). COMM 235 students were provided with a handout with 36 open circles, but the test was reduced to two minutes due to limited time in the lab. Scoring of each test was based on the number of unique ideas sketched within the fixed time, and was collected merely to inform teaching methods and not for purposes of valid research. A total of 27 students completed the same, identical test in class on three occasions. The results of the first test

revealed an overall average of 6.5 unique ideas, with two students completing 10-11 ideas. The results of the third test revealed an overall average of 10.8 unique ideas, with 15 out of 27 students (55%) completing between 10-27 unique ideas.

In addition to the creativity tests, a survey was conducted at the end of the course to assess the impact of the creative cultivation activities. Students were asked to report their behaviors related to self-care and creativity prior to the course and during the course, and share written reflections.

**Creative contract** – Students were asked to estimate how often they were able to pursue at least one activity related to their self-care goals. All of the 33 respondents reported an increase in the frequency of their engagement in self-care activities during the semester, compared to prior months.

**Creative immersions and activities** – Students were asked how often they engaged in activities outside of class to fuel creativity, (ie. journaling, sketching, creative immersions, making things for fun). All 33 respondents reported an increase in engagement during the semester, with 75% of respondents reporting that they participated at least weekly.

**Creative confidence** – Students were asked to rank their level of confidence in their ability to think creatively prior to the course and at the end of the course, using a 5-point Likert scale. All 33 respondents reported an increase in creative confidence, with 75% of respondents reporting a level of “confident” or “extremely confident” at the end of the course, compared to 25% prior to the course.

**Reflections** – Students were asked to reflect on their experiences during the semester in response to this directive: “Please describe at least one example when you felt a sense of satisfaction as a result of a creative experience or achievement through this course.”

Many responses referred to a specific project or creative activity:

*“I felt satisfaction in being able to have freedom within guidelines and was able to think creatively about my own interests.”*

*“The blog website feels like something I'm actually proud of, rather than something I made to turn in as an assignment.”*

*“I usually felt pretty accomplished when completing a big project, to see it go from the planning and design stages to the final project was always very satisfying and fulfilling.”*

*“I don't think homework is fun, but I always looked forward to the homework and projects in this class because I had so much freedom of what I was creating.”*

Other responses referred to creative immersions:

*“I was deeply inspired by Holly's recent talk about her creative process. I found it comforting to know that the creative process isn't linear. I also appreciated that even incredible artists can doubt themselves sometimes.”*

*“Over spring break, I had the opportunity to visit the Chicago Art Institute. While there I had a new appreciation of the art due to my new understanding of creativity. I became more interested in learning about each art piece rather than just viewing them. While at the Art Institute I took my own time to sit down and reflect about my experiences there. I felt like I could truly appreciate the art due to my new knowledge of creativity.”*

*“Writing my reflection on the solar eclipse was a once in a lifetime experience. I was so glad I had the opportunity to view it and experience it with my friends. It was also very enjoyable to talk about my experience through an assignment.”*

Then students were asked to consider how they could continue to grow as creative persons: “Please describe any creative activities or processes from this course that you plan to continue in the future.” Many students commented that they would continue some form of creative meditation, doodling, or drawing, while others noted a desire to continue creative immersions as a way of maintaining mental wellness and creativity:

*“I continue to doodle and sketch more because it gives me a better guide of what I am creating in my head and putting it on to paper. This is also beneficial when sharing my ideas with others.”*

*“I plan to go to more creative events specifically - more concerts, art galleries, and art classes.”*

*“I enjoyed the reflection drawing and collage making. I've never spent much time with art, but I enjoyed the feeling it gave me when I participated in class. When I have more time, I plan to engage in more of these activities to improve my mental health and stress levels.”*

*“I plan to continue adapting to a healthy lifestyle and taking breaks to go outside. It is easy for me to get lost in social media, and some aspects of it can be toxic. I need to take more breaks from my phone and enjoy other things in life.”*

*“I plan on continuing to journal and find new ways to be creative. I think that brain breaks are important and something that I need to continue to value.”*

*“Just being outdoors and taking a minute to realize what I am surrounded by. Plants, trees, grass, everything this campus has to offer... before this class I did not appreciate it enough.”*

### **Next steps**

The knowledge and insights I have gained from this project have affirmed my commitment to fostering creativity with all of my students. I plan to continue the “creative cultivation” activities in COMM 235 and will consider how to include the tools in my other project-based courses. The students’ growth in creative confidence was indicated through the various metrics, and observed in their final presentations as they explained their process – which included creative risks, failures, and successes.

My research for this project revealed a circular relationship between holistic care and creativity. While holistic wellness can have a positive impact on cognitive function and lead to improved creative thinking, evidence also indicates that engagement in creative activities has a positive impact on wellness. A recently published study, “Creativity and Well-Being Among College Students,” reports a “positive correlation between creativity and happiness” and recommends that faculty “emphasize practical teaching and strive to guide college students to engage in meaningful creative practical activities, thereby enhancing their sense of well-being and promoting their mental health” (Li and Wu).

As the creative “coach” for this mission-aligned project, I personally benefitted from intentionally participating in the activities and creative immersions in partnership with the students, which has helped me to develop my own self-care plan to embrace the value of *cura personalis*. I am grateful for the opportunity to more deeply integrate the Jesuit mission within my teaching.

## Acknowledgement

Exploring new pedagogical approaches felt a bit daunting at times as a third-year professor, but thankfully I had the support of my mentor for this project, Dr. Kathy Winterman, Director for the School of Education. I am grateful for the time and resources she generously shared to guide me through my own creative challenges.

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