

Jason Blair - Human Centered Creativity Transcript

- Hello everyone, my name is Jason Blair. This is my twentieth year of teaching elementary art and I love every minute of it. In addition to teaching, I'm also a creativity consultant working with teachers in districts to help grow creative thinkers. I'm also working as the teacher leader in residence at the Columbus Museum of Art, and the co-assistant director on the Cultivating Creative & Civic Capacities research project with Harvard's Project Zero and the Columbus Museum of Art. Welcome to Human Centered Creativity. I'm excited to be with you all today. Before we begin, I wanna begin with a short story and to me I think typifies what Human Center Creativity is all about. So a few years back, we were in the middle of a project when a student came up to me and said, "Mr. Blair, today is Sarah's last day. Do you mind if we make a card for her?" Sure I said, what a thoughtful idea. And a few minutes later, she came back up and said, "Mr. Blair, do you mind if a few more friends help me with it?" Sure, that sounds like great. Great, have fun. A few more minutes pass, "Mr. Blair, do you mind if we use some large roll paper to make a bigger card?" Okay, so at that point I'm now thinking, what did I get myself into? So a few deep breaths and I say, sure, go for it. A few more minutes pass, "Mr. Blair, we really wanna splatter paint. Can we, can we, can we?" At this point, all bets are off. Sure, why not go for it, have at it. So now at this point, the whole class is engaged in a sort of creativity farewell making factory. There's paint splattering, hands being painted, brushes falling, water spilling everywhere, laughter filling the art studio. Nothing I had outlined for the day was being worked on. But I sensed something bigger was happening, so I rolled with it. At the end of the class, the students asked if they could place the gigantic card on the drying rack to pick up at the end of the day. Sure I said, thinking it would just be forgotten about. That was a more of an in the moment experience that would really end up just staying on the drying rack, waiting to be recycled. Well, 3:00 PM came, got a knock on the door. "Mr. Blair, can we pick up that card?" Sure, by the way where's the rest of your class? She looked at me and she was like, so I look out the door, and sure enough, there's the whole class standing right behind her, smiling ear to ear. You see, what they did was they snuck out early that day, they grabbed ahold of the card and banner, and they held it tight for her to run through it on her last day before getting on the bus. The smiles, the laughter, the tears, the memories it made everything worth it. That moment was way more impactful than anything I had outlined for the day. For me, this story is what Human Centered Creativity is all about. It's the opportunity for students to harness their creative capacities to make connections with others, to deepen their understanding of different perspectives, and to create meaningful shared experiences. Now in the process, they were exercising essential dispositions that every child needs to find success, both in school and in life. They were exercising their empathic curiosity for others, they were taking risks, being flexible, experimenting, coupled with ambiguity, asking questions, being playful and imaginative, reflecting and iterating. They were exercising their creative capacities in a way that placed human connection above all else. I remember watching that day as one student's idea quickly spread through the room. I marveled at the way creating for someone else became so contagious, so fast. I could sense the students had a deep desire to create for

a purpose. It wasn't to create a piece of art for themselves, or for me, or even for their parents. It was a sense of pride that they are creating something for a peer. For a classmate that was about to embark upon a new journey to a new place, and this was to send her off with a reminder of where she had come from. The stories, the people, and the memories that helped shape her will now carry her through to the challenges of exploring her new home, with new friends, and making new memories in the process. This experience was really sort of an aha, moment for me. It made me stop and wonder, what if students used their creativity to make for and with other students? How might creating for and with others impact learning? How many impact creative confidence, the classroom culture. How many create a sense of belonging for the students in the class? This one experience has had a profound impact on me and my practice today. So, what is Human Centered Creativity? Well to me, it's helping students use their creativity to make connections, deepen relationships, provide a sense of agency that our students yearn for today. In this day and age, students wanna feel like they have a voice in their learning, like they have a choice in how they share that voice, and that they have the power to make a difference in someone else's life. Human Centered Creativity provides an opportunity for students to create with purpose and be intentional about their choices along the way. Using a more human centered approach to creativity development helps students feel seen, heard, and know that they truly matter. It's a process that builds creative confidence by taking risks, being vulnerable, and through the creative process, persevering through the challenges that arise along the way. This process builds in our students innate desire to help others as well. They love seeing the smiles on classmates faces as they know that someone spent time getting to know them and creating something that shows respect for their identity and where they came from. It's not just about the product one creates for someone else. It's also about the introspection, self-awareness, and the ability to share thoughts, ideas, and emotions throughout the entire creative process. It builds their creative capacities that our world needs. Human Centered Creativity can be in all disciplines too. It's not just in the arts. Every content standard in any discipline can all be traced back to human connections. How does our environment impact our relationships? How do numbers and data impact our understanding of others? How might poetry and writing help us find joy and shared experiences? Every discipline should be looking to see how we can harness the power of our creative dispositions to deepen our relationships with one another in our classrooms, our communities, and in our world. Imagine if learning was an experience, where students learned with and through others. One where standards were learned in relation to how they impact our families, our friends, our communities. Exploring a more humanistic approach to teaching learning helps provide the meaning, relevancy, and connection that we all need right now. We are preparing our students for a rapidly changing world. One where content is no longer king. Isolated facts and compartmentalized standards can simply be Googled, or Alexad. What can't be found on the swipe of a screen is our ability to understand different perspectives, and our ability to make connections between people, questions, problems, and solutions. Our world needs collaborative thinkers with self-awareness, and the ability to understand different perspectives. Students wanna to see the relevancy of standards. They wanna hear the stories of those impacted by these disciplines. They wanna feel the purpose behind their course content. This

pandemic has made me wonder if learning can be more impactful when we make connections to others in the process. The work I've been digging into over the past several years all of a sudden seemed to connect for me. What if our educational system, that is traditionally focused on products and isolation, and designed to produce test scores, rankings, and data, now became more about shared humanity and a deeper understanding of the people behind the content standards? Traditional schooling does not seem to focus on dispositions. And where does it focus on deepening human connection and understanding? What we know is that the world we live in is a complex, nuance, and internet connected space, yet our educational system tends to focus on the simplistic, the isolated, and the compartmentalized. Well I do believe we can change how we approach teaching and learning, to better prepare our students to be future-ready citizens and well-rounded human beings. When I began this journey into a more human centered approach to creativity, I started by looking through the lines of what it means to think like an artist. Artists embrace ambiguity and take risks. They value questions over answers, they're playful, they generate ideas. They wonder, they imagine. They express emotions and so much more. Thinking like an artist means embracing the whole child. It means celebrating the strengths and interests of every child. We need to embrace the dispositions of thinking like an artist, and harness our empathic curiosity for others. To develop experiences where we empower students to become agents of change, capable of challenging the status quo, towards a more just and sustainable world for everyone. Thinking like an artist and developing a more human centered approach to creativity made me wonder, what might it look, sound, and feel like to have a space where the focus was on developing the dispositions of being a creative thinker and learning with and through others. So today I wanna share a few examples that might help you in your setting. These are a few challenges that have helped me create a culture of Human Centered Creativity in our space, at my school. The first two challenges were done in a virtual setting, but could easily be adapted in face to face as well. When the pandemic hit, it really illuminated the need for more human centered approach to creativity, because I saw students struggling to find the connections that they so desperately missed from school. I wanted to create learning experiences that didn't focus on a specific skill or standard, but rather a thinking dispositions inherent of thinking like an artist using Human Centered Creativity. So for the first challenge, I wanted to help students play with the idea of needing more connection in a virtual setting. So I asked them to find an inanimate object to personify. I asked them to create a short video of what it would be like if their object came to life. By using imagination and playfulness to create a short video about connection and belonging was a great way to make it more human centered, even though it was an inanimate object. Here's the lonely cup.

- [Cup] Hey, come back here.

- What was that?

- [Cup] It's me.

- Huh?
- [Cup] On your table.
- I'm confused.
- It's me sitting on your table, the cup.
- What do you want?
- [Cup] I just want a friend.
- Okay, I'll be your friend.
- [Cup] Yeah, be my friend.
- So, what do you wanna do?
- [Cup] Let's jump on the trampoline.
- No! No, no. ♪ Don't you know too much already ♪ ♪ I'll only hurt you if you let me ♪ ♪ Mm, mm, mm ♪
- All he wanted was a friend, and it pains me that I couldn't save him. I couldn't save him from the trampoline, I'm sorry.
- [Cup] And all of your friends, he would've loved having all of his friends here with him.
- Another challenge I posed for students in a virtual setting was the, "It's not a... It's a... challenge". The idea here was for students to ask one other person in their home that they were quarantining with to find an object and show us all the things it could be besides what it actually was. So the idea was that the students were exercising their creative capacities as well, like thinking flexibly and generating ideas by using a random, everyday household object. But the human centered creative approach added a layer of finding someone else to create the video with. This provided time to make connections, laugh, and find joy with someone else during such a challenging time. Here's one students video.
- What are you doing with that book?
- It's not a book, it's a portal.
- What are you doing with that scooter?

- It's not a scooter, it's a car.
- What are you doing with that dog?
- It's not a dog, it's my partner. ♪ I got those horses in the back ♪ ♪ Horse that I can touch ♪ ♪
Here's it is my ♪
- What are you guys doing with those water bottles?
- They're not water bottles.
- They're our horses.
- What are you doing with that stick?
- It's not a stick, it's a wand.
- Woo!
- What are you doing with that box?
- It's not a box, it's my spaceship.
- What are you doing with that soap?
- I'm washing my hands. Make sure you wash your hands and stay safe.
- One of the central ideas to Human Centered Creativity is perspective thinking, understanding the perspective of another, or in the case of the lonely object, understand the perspective of another thing. Building on the idea of perspective thinking was the Happy Space challenge. This could be completed in school or in a virtual setting. For the challenge, I introduced our students to the design process. There are so many variations of design processes out there and I tend to use the approach by IDEO, the design from Palo Alto. They also have a great designers toolkit on their website that I highly recommend. The idea of this challenge is to design a happy space for someone else. To begin, students would create an empathy interview. This is a series of open ended questions that help you get to know the user of the happy space, to ensure it's a more meaningful design. Students generate questions that will help inspire their design by adding elements related to the users answers. The next step is for students to begin to generate ideas of what to include in the happy space design based on the empathy interview. The students might make sketches, think about tools and materials, and get feedback from the user as well. The last step is to create the happy space. If this is in a school,

you could create models or you could use the actual classroom as a blank canvas. Ask students to design a happy workspace. What features would you add to each student's individual workspace? Here you see one student showing his inspiration ideation stages with some sketches and empathy interview questions that he created along the way. You also see his grandmother for whom the space was designed for. She has her spot for reading, her beautiful orchid she loves, a blanket, and so many other thoughtful touches that he created for her. Here, another student created a happy space in the closet for his sister. Wow, you should've heard the squeal she let out when she saw this. And yes, he included real hot chocolate for her. Hopefully the parents knew about this one because there's a lot of white carpet in there. Another Human Centered Creativity challenge was the Hidden Emotion Art Gallery. For this challenge, we were inspired by the work of Marc Brackett and his Mood Meter featured in his book, "Permission to Feel." This is a great resource for helping students build their emotional vocabulary. The idea for this challenge was that we need to honor where we are right now with regards to our emotions. Many of us are experiencing a dozen different emotions, and for some of us, that's all before 10:00 AM. Well, it's the same for our students as well. Emotions are such an essential element to Human Centered Creativity. We all experience emotions. Our ability to understand our emotions, empathize, sympathize with others, experiencing different emotions. It's essential to helping us understand our relationships and connections with those around us. It helps us communicate better, support one another, and creates a safe space to be vulnerable together. We know our ability to regulate and understand the depth and complexity of our emotions has a huge impact on our readiness to learn as well. So the idea was to ask the students to recognize the emotions they were feeling, and make their emotions visible. Students were asked to create a piece of art that shared their emotions they were experiencing through symbols and metaphors. But instead of hanging them out in the open, they were asked to hide them somewhere for others to discover. So the students had to gather others in their home and go on an emotion hunt to find these expressive works of art that were hiding in the shadows around their homes. Some were in the closets, some under the stairs, some were even under the bed. This created a safe way to make our hidden emotions visible. It helped spark a conversation about how we're all feeling right now in this moment. Why maybe, for some of us, hiding our emotions are what we're doing. This can be done in school as well. Maybe create a tiny gallery of hidden emotions for another class. The artist could design an emotional scavenger hunt incorporating other disciplines in the process. It could be a great collaboration with the school guidance counselor as well. These last two challenges are variations on the same experience. They can be done in any setting, with any discipline, and at any age. The first challenge is The Gift Challenge. The idea behind this challenge is to design a gift for someone else in the class that shows a deeper connection and understanding using art and design. To begin, we used the empathy interview process that I mentioned earlier. We talked about what interviewing looks, sounds, and feels like. That closed ended questions don't tell us as much as open ended questions. We talked about follow-up questions and being flexible to see where the answers might take you. During the empathy interview, I told the class, You don't need to come up and say I'm finished, 'cause it's really just a conversation. It's not meant to be looked at as a checklist or something to move on from. It's about getting

to know someone through conversation and stories. They then took empathy interview research and began to think of ideas. Once they found an idea for a gift, they were given several classes to actually create it. The last step was to write a card to accompany the gift. Again, we talked about a meaningful card. It's more of saying "you rock" or "you're awesome", but it's about specific detailed connections, stories, hopes and dreams. The card helped explain the symbolism and deeper meaning behind the work as well. It wasn't just about the product, but the process of making the special connection. The final celebration was the gift giving ceremony and this was extremely powerful to see. Watching the joy in the artists face as they gave their gift to a classmate, watching a smile slowly curl up as they read their card, it was powerful and inspiring. Here's one student reflecting on the power of The Gift Challenge.

- Like when you first like announced the partners, I was a little unsure 'cause like I didn't know Isaac that well, 'cause like, like he was in my class last year too, but like we never really talked to each other, because like, we just didn't. And so like now I know so much more about him, and like so, like we exchanged gifts and we both were like stunned, like how much we like listened to each other, and like it was just I like the feeling of it.

- Her reflection underscores what a powerful act the Human Centered Creativity can be. It's about feeling the learning, it's about embodied learning. It's not just about consuming isolated standards or facts, but rather it's about using standards and content to make meaningful connections to others. The last challenge is a bit of riff on The Gift Challenge. It's called The Worry Challenge. A very similar process, but it's about recognizing that we all have worries in this world. That no one walks around worry free. That our worries take many different shapes and forms, but we all have them. Some big, some small, some now some later. But they're all with us in some way, shape, or form. They began by writing a worry on a small sheet of paper. This could be a worry about school, friends, homework, family, anything. They then placed on the table, creating a sort of worry gallery. I then asked the students one at a time to go up and select a worry that was not their own. Their task was to create a symbolic representation to help address the worry of their classmate. The idea is not to try and solve it, because I didn't wanna put that on another student to feel the pressure of trying to solve someone else's worry. But it was more of an opportunity to say "I see you, I hear you, and I'm with you". The idea is that students understand we are here for one another. I will say, time should be spent building a brave space in your room to help empower students to feel ready to embark upon journeys like this. When were Human Centered Creativity serves as that foundation for learning. So for something like this, you can remind students, they can share only what they feel comfortable with. The main idea is recognizing that we all have challenges in our lives and we're all there for one another. These challenges were designed to help students understand different perspectives, to be empathically curious, to bring their whole identity into school and not check who they truly are outside of our school doors each morning. Now these challenges could be completed in any discipline as well. Imagine a worry project in the first term of an algebra class. A way to let others know you're not alone. Or imagine if you use data and

numbers to create a gift for someone else. What might that look, sound, and feel like? Here are a few reflections from these Human Centered Creativity challenges.

- So the worry was that she did not belong, so I'm making a stuffed key so that when she gets, like, thinks she doesn't belong, that she can like hug it and it will comfort her.

- On the top you can see all the gems are floating on top of the fluff, sponge I could call it. And basically all the gems are like, compliments and stuff so they can stay on top, but like the paper, instead of going underneath, so like the judgemental ones, so the, they're getting sucked into the sponge to be thrown into the drain basically I'm getting rid of. And I made this because my partner, she has social anxiety, meaning that she is scared of what people think of her.

- is like, that you stand out and you like to help other kids a lot, but I hear that from teachers a lot and then when it's from a boy in my classroom, it's more meaningful and I'm not just another person in the room, I'm not just another girl on the wall. I'm special and when he was saying those nice things about me it really made my face glow.

- She articulates that so beautifully. The power of Human Centered Creativity. It's about being seen, it's about being heard, and it's about feeling valued. Human Centered Creativity is about creating a more just and sustainable world for everyone. Thank you for doing what you do each and every day to grow creative thinkers in our schools and in our communities. I wish you all strength, health, and happiness in this coming school year. Thank you all, have a great day.