Taking Digital Creativity to the Art Classroom: Mystery Box Swap

BY RYAN SHIN

Today's students are the first generation to grow up with computers, cell-phones, video games, music and video players, and other digital technologies. As digital natives, a new term coined by Prensky (2001), they spend more time reading text messaging lines than lines from books, and they spend more time on Facebook than putting their energies into reading a book (Pfeiffer, 2008). Digital natives are active in using Web technologies such as Facebook and blogs, participating in creative writing, manipulating, tagging, and communicating. They also create music using online music mixing and songwriting tools, making and sharing their movies as well as commenting on others. They enjoy creating and maintaining social networks to share, support, and feel connected with people they have known.

Often, even though their talents and creative activities in this digital world are not recognized or respected in school, many students "have something in their lives that's really engaging—something that they do and that they are good at, something that has an engaging, creative component to it" (Prensky, 2005, p. 62). An example is Web 2.0, which is a new mode for creating and sharing information on the Web (O'Reilly, 2005).

Using new tools on the Web, such as wikis, blogs, podcasting, videos, Facebook, Second Life, and flickers, Web 2.0 participants create their spaces to share information, knowledge, and entertainment (http://www.digitalnative.org). By expressing themselves and working with others, they can release unlimited imaginations (Rymaszewski et al, 2006).

The purpose of this article is to explore what and how art educators can negotiate with this digital world that is full of creative inventions, energies, and forces, rather than regarding these new technologies as a detrimental part of contemporary pop and visual culture. First, I will explore the concept of digital creativity and share three examples related to it that I have observed on the Web. After that, I will showcase an art project, Mystery Box Swap, providing an example of how art educators might explore the digital world and creativity, from which an art project is drawn, developed, and taught. I will conclude this article by encouraging art educators to explore and experience the creative flow of the digital world and how to take advantage of it for teaching and research purposes.

Figure 1. Objects and photos in the box represent the most memorable experiences of an international student.
Digital Creativity

Artists often say that it is difficult to define creativity. However, they also claim that they recognize it when they see it. Art educators also might agree. To people who are not associated with creative endeavors, creativity may mean different things under different occasions. Creativity generally means something new, original, or connecting something unexpected or unassociated (Zimmerman, 2009). Contemporary creativity researchers provide three key elements in approaching the concept of creativity, which can also be applied to digital creativity (Loveless, 2002). The three are: the individual person, domain and field, and socio-cultural context. Studies conducted to define creativity focus on what creative individuals have done according to personal qualities by studying shared characteristics of creative persons. An example is the presentation of personal qualities of creative individuals. As an example, Shalcross (1981) lists: openness to experience, independence, self-confidence, willingness to take risks, sense of humor or playfulness, enjoyment of experimentation, sensitivity, lack of a feeling of being threatened, personal courage, unconventional thinking, flexibility, preference for complexity, goal orientation, internal control, originality, self-reliance, and persistence. This list of creative qualities echoes that of Csikszentmihalyi who has observed that a creative individual takes part in a state of flow as a mental and psychological state in which the person is so fully immersed in an activity that he or she loses all sense of time. Participants in the digital world frequently experience this flow state (Chen, 2006; Pilke, 2004) by creating and sharing information and participating in entertainment (Steins & Stephens, 2008).

In the context of the domain and field, a domain contains the symbolic knowledge of culture, such as visual arts, theatre, art education, music, or mathematics. The domains relative to the digital world are still being defined and split into subdomains, birthing new domains such as Web 2.0. A field is composed of all gatekeepers in a domain. In the field of visual arts, they are artists, museum professionals, art educators, critics, and audiences. The fields of the digital world are not only composed of authorities and professionals formally trained in established domain specific institutions, but also everyday computer users who serve as gatekeepers, such as Time magazine’s 2006 Person of the Year: YOU—an anonymous individual who has created content on the World Wide Web. The relationship between domain and field, as Csikszentmihalyi (1996) points out, is “If a symbolic domain is necessary for a person to innovate in, a field is necessary to determine whether the innovation is worth making a fuss about” (p. 41).

The third element of creativity is the social-cultural context. An image of a lonely scientist or artist with a light bulb floating above his or her head, having a “Eureka!” moment, does not adequately describe today’s creativity in the digital world. Leach (2001) points out that musicians and scholars who have achieved highly regarded creative inventions could not have done so without association and interaction with other creative people, supportive systems, and collaboration. Likewise, any creative inventor in the digital world does not emerge from a vacuum state without having relationships with other influential people. Rather, in a digital world people are connected, supporting and critiquing each other in the social context of Web users using the aforementioned technologies. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) emphasizes the relationship among creativity elements in his systems model, explaining that creativity results from “the interaction of a system composed of three elements: a culture that contains symbolic rules, a person who brings novelty into the symbolic domain, and a field of experts who recognize and validate the innovation (p. 6).”

Examples of Digital Creativity

Where people participate in the digital world, they may not be involved with ‘capital C’ creativity, such as Einstein’s inventions and Leonardo da Vinci’s or Andy Warhol’s artworks, but are engaged with ‘little c’ creativity (Craft, 2000). ‘Little c’ creativity examples include teenagers constructing personal websites through Facebook or MySpace, bloggers creating a cyber group, a teen avatar as a representation of an alter ego, and another teenager text messaging and playing and exploring with images and videos. I describe three examples of creative imagination found on the Web that art educators might introduce in their art classes.

Roz Dimon, my first example, is a digital artist who produces digital media art in a creative way and has shared her work online extensively. Whenever I look at Dimon’s works on her website, I praise her as being creative with technology. Even though I, as a graphic and web designer, have seen many textbook and visited numerous Web tutorials, I find Dimon’s approach to be unique and very creative in comparison to her peers. Her work dynamically presents a creative use of combining and connecting digital technologies that most people have not yet considered.
Her work consists of two main components: digital imagery and a textual story or poem. Typically, her artwork is displayed in one area of the Web window, and a related story is presented below or beside it. The plain and hyperlinked text for the story is differentiated by color. Viewers read the story and as they click on the hyperlinked text they see an image associated with each text. In so doing, they experience interactivity and viewer participation as important characteristics of Web art (Colman, 2005). Each story features 5 to 15 or more multi-layered images. Some of her stories align with collages or collage-making processes, while others build a narrative through a sequence of hand-drawn lines or painterly brush strokes that sync with the meaning of the text. This interactive mode encourages viewers to click whatever text link they like, thus enabling them to construct and deconstruct the story, and the art that relates to it, in whatever sequence they desire. This allows for a new way of looking at digital art in which students can exercise their own inventive linking (Taylor, 2000; Taylor & Carpenter, 2002). Dimon's art, as an example of digital creativity, can inspire students to think of creative ways to express ideas or concepts and to accept new digital media through a format that traditional art cannot provide (Figure 2).

Another example of digital creativity relates to the eBay Mystery Auction.

I encountered this Mystery Auction while participating in reviewing the work of MFA student Christiana Caro at my university. Caro has explored this recently developed online auction from an artist's perspective. eBay Mystery Auction is a new phenomenon, available through this Internet company, that originates from people's desires for collection, discovery, and surprise (Harper, 2006). As a rule, a substantial part of the mystery auction listings remain undisclosed. What interests me most about this auction is not selling and buying of unknown stuff, but how sellers creatively describe unseen items in order to provoke curiosity and spur participants' imaginations and desires to purchase an item. Some people share stories of heartbreak and others entertain with humorous anecdotes (Steiner, 2005).

Caro associates this Mystery Auction with wunderkammern, cabinets of curiosity or wonder, that is, rooms decorated with objects collected to present a collector's world view or experience. She believes that as a contemporary phenomenon of the wunderkammern, this Mystery Auction is a result of the age-old desire to collect/surprise/discover (Caro, personal communication, 2009). When I observe this online activity, as an art educator, I learn that participants focus on materials, around which feelings, ideas, and stories are expressed, including acquisition episodes and personal meanings linked to them. This echoes what some art educators call material culture studies (Bolin, 1995; Bolin & Blandy, 2003), noting the significance of studying all forms and visual expressions in everyday contexts.

My third example of the interface of creativity and digital artwork also relates to mystery, and a recently released movie, Coraline (2009) by Laika, a 3-D stop-motion animation adapted from Neil Gaiman's (2002) novel Coraline. The movie features a story of a heroine's adventure, courage, and family love, which mainly used real hand-crafted miniature puppets, props, and sets. One thing that makes this movie different from others is a recent project of the entertainment division of Laika through the Web as a special pre-release campaign. The project sent out mystery gift boxes to 50 bloggers as surprises. The boxes included handcrafted charms and movie artifacts, such as keys, toys, stones, photos, all of which were used or could be seen in the movie.

A group of bloggers who did not receive the mystery boxes—but heard about the project—were inspired by this idea, and they created their own Coraline Mystery Box Swap event in February 2009, organized under the web blogger name, My Little Mochi. My Little Mochi announced this project on a blog site, and eventually there were 44 participants who signed up. They were given about one month to make their own mystery box and then were randomly matched for swapping. Participants designed, crafted, painted, sculptured, and wrote about their responses to watching Coraline. Most of their boxes were documented, and their photos are displayed in Flickr dedicated for the Coraline Mystery Box Swap. Some examples include crafted keys, dolls, sealed envelopes, letters to partner recipients, necklaces, jewelry, decorated bottles of buttons, paintings, viewing stones, cards, poems, night lights, button boxes, glasses, bowls, mini posters, and other crafted objects. Furthermore, the boxes themselves are decorated with objects.
and paintings. The creators have uploaded photos and written about their creative experiences on the website. Many also are eagerly sharing them in their own blog and personal websites. Some also show photos in which they are receiving, opening, and decorating their homes with objects found in one of the boxes (Figures 3-5).

**Mystery Box Swap**

*In this section, I describe an art project inspired by the creative potential of digital creativity on the Web inspired by the examples just provided. The goal of this project was to help pre-service teachers see and value everyday on-line experiences as vital resources in art classrooms in order to develop contemporary art lessons and move beyond teaching only about famous art works and using traditional media. First, my students as digital natives discussed their use of digital technologies, addressing various Web 2.0 technologies as well as cell phones, cameras, iPods, and other digital devices. They recognized that people can participate in writing, creating, designing, videotaping, communicating, and socializing through these technologies.

Addressing how we use these technologies in art education, I introduced them to eBay Mystery Auction. They saw the Mystery Auction as a way to provoke curiosity and interests in objects and as means to understand and share the life and experiences of others. The Coraline Mystery Box Swap also was shared as an example of how people came to be involved in creative activities through available on-line communication technologies. Then, I invited the students to create their own mystery boxes for swapping in class, providing a guideline similar to the one for the on-line Coraline Mystery Box Swap project: fill the box with several objects that express their past life experiences, such as a special moment, celebration, a person you want to remember, a life-changing experience, a vision or goal, or anything significant to the student. Some students used shoe boxes, and others used their own special boxes made of paper, plastic, wood, or metal. They were encouraged to decorate the inside and outside of their boxes, carefully choosing objects that represent what they wished to communicate through them. They also were asked to write a short description in the form of a poem, novel, letter, or short story attached to the outside of the box, as seen in the eBay Mystery Auction descriptions. Inside of the box, they were asked to write a letter to their partner to explain directly what the objects in the box were and what ideas they expressed. This was a homework assignment that helped keep the contents of the mystery boxes a secret from the other students in the class. When they brought their boxes to class, the students took time to read each description, becoming curious about the contents in each box. Each then swapped their box with a partner and explored the enclosed objects.

**Students shared various experiences through objects.** The topics included: life-changing moments, exploration of unknown places, memories about grandma, having a first baby, a significant college experience, a special ceremony, a stressful moment, and childhood memories. One student created a box that contained objects and images related to her best experiences as an international student (Figure 1 and 6); and another student memorized her late husband, sharing the nightmare evening that changed her whole life (Figure 7).
Many students chose to take a fun, meaningful, and useful approach applicable to their future class. Just reading a description outside of a box made them excited about things they had yet to see. A student commented that this would be a good project in the first or second week of an art class because it could help students get to know more about new classmates. We also discussed another possible mystery box exchange project that could involve students from other states or countries sharing something special about their communities and lifestyles. I noticed that this project helped students understand that art is not just about making something with brushes, paints, wood, or clay, but they learned to express important ideas and experience through everyday objects, forms, and expressions through collecting them in a personal and meaningful way. The most important lesson I was hoping for them to learn was that artwork can also be inspired from new technologies and created from what appears to be frivolous and playful in our daily context, and that art educators, therefore, can make students excited, expressive, and creative, in this case, in the context of participating in the digital world.

Conclusion
To many of us who were born and raised with cassette tapes and CD players, this new digital world provides challenges to us in adapting to and embracing this world into our classrooms. This new digital world is not viewed as a valuable investment of students' time and energy. Art educators might assume that our mission is to keep students away from instantly gratifying pop and media culture. However, those who have used these technologies encourage us to become digital immigrants (Prensky, 2001). Even those who were not born with them can learn to take advantage of them as educational tools (Buffington, 2008), as seen on Craig Rolands's Art Education site.

As seen in the examples shared in this article, the digital world and new technologies can serve as resources for fostering creative student engagement in open-ended class projects in which creative outcomes are not anticipated by students or their teachers. Even though many of us may never be as fully immersed in digital technologies as the youth of today, we as digital immigrants can draw creative ideas and projects based on what people in the digital world do in everyday contexts in order to create exciting and meaningful educational activities for our students. I encourage art educators to explore, experience, and embrace creative digital world and technologies.

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REFERENCES

ENDNOTES
1 Visit the sites, dimensives.com or www.artstory.net, to see her works.
2 Caro's video artwork about Mystery Auction can be found at http://christianacaro.blogspot.com/2009/05/ua-graduate-video-screening.html.
3 An example of a Mystery Auction description: "Everybody who purchases an envelope will receive a gift from me...This is where the fun comes in. I will not be the one who randomly picks the envelope. My cat, Beans, will pick the envelope. This is fun for Beans. She loves picking out things. Pretty weird, but she put her paw on what she wants. All I do is tell her to pick or "give me" while snapping my fingers, and she says "snow" and puts her paw on it and slides it in my direction...Whatever is in the envelope is a gift from me to you."
4 (e-Bay Mystery Auction Item number 190250769412, September, 2008)
5 http://www.flickr.com/photos/my_little_mochi
6 http://digitalarted.blogspot.com

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