

The Idea Closet

Bruce M. Mackh, Director of the Arts and Cultural Management Program
Michigan State University

It might be fairly obvious that every course needs a classroom, or at least a designated space in which to meet. But in considering the potential physical and material resources that might facilitate creative teaching and learning, especially in an integrated or transdisciplinary situation, requirements might go beyond the typical tables and chairs arranged in a large, brightly-lit room. A classroom designated as a creative learning space would, of course, also need to provide places for students to sit and to work; however, creative learning, especially when partnered with the arts, might involve more than textbooks, computers, notebooks, and pencils.

We might understand that students in higher education are often required to provide their own materials for the accomplishment of their class assignments: for instance, students usually have their own laptop computers, writing utensils, and notebooks. But the burden also—and often depending upon the class subject—falls upon the institution to provide material resources. For instance, if we take a cue from elementary art and music programs, students are regularly provided with a great many supplies, from tempera paint and paint brushes to tambourines and triangles. Readily available supplies facilitate student learning, allowing for the free flow of creative methods and techniques.

Since classroom space is often at a premium, and also because instructional spaces can be shared between numerous instructors or used to teach diverse subjects, the classroom itself is perhaps not an important consideration beyond ensuring that it is large enough to allow for movement. Material resources are another matter: in terms of physical space, storage of a large collection of material resources requires some thoughtful planning. A large closet with direct access from the classroom in which the creative courses take place would be an ideal way to provide both ease of storage, organization, and ready access to consumable materials, equipment, props, or other items that might be needed for a variety of creative processes or performances.

Because of the potential of the items housed in this storage space to spark creativity, it could be called the Idea Closet. Of course, creative teaching and learning is by its very nature in a constant state of change. No two classes will require precisely the same materials or equipment. We might therefore consider this topic quite broadly in looking at the kinds of resources that each of the areas of the arts might need.

As perhaps the arts area with the least specific equipment needs, dance simply requires open space; however, padding the floor with gymnastics mats would facilitate freedom of movement and ensure a modicum of safety. Taking these steps might encourage students to take attempt a greater level of personal risk than would be likely in a traditionally-equipped classroom, and in so doing to stretch their creative capabilities in terms of physical movement. These mats could be stacked neatly in the Idea Closet until needed, and could just as easily be returned to storage when their use was completed.

Theatre is another area that does not have a large list of required materials and equipment, but there are some items that could be stored in the Idea Closet that could be useful in creative explorations of drama. A box of costume pieces, a selection of props, and lengths of fabric could be made available in the closet, perhaps sparking students' creative ideas in their theatrical explorations.

Musical expression may also be a component of creative teaching and learning. Although students who are experienced musicians might be assumed to have their own instruments, the Idea Closet could house a collection of simple instruments that do not require advanced skill such as tambourines, maracas, bongos, recorders, triangles, bells and similar items. These resources might facilitate participation in music performance by students who do not have previous experience as musicians. The closet could also house a portable system for playing and recording music, broadening the possibilities for creative inclusion of music in integrated or transdisciplinary investigations.

A paper from the LSC/Sloan Project *Cognition and Context: How Space Affects Learning and Creativity in the Undergraduate Setting*.

Visual arts and design are likely to require the greatest share storage space in the Idea Closet simply because the creation of visual artworks or designed objects usually requires tangible materials. These would include consumable supplies traditionally associated with art-making such as paper, paint, clay, yarn, and so forth. In order to encourage innovative thinking, the Idea Closet should also accommodate an ongoing collection of gathered, scavenged, or donated items with potential usefulness.

These items could spark idea formation, re-purposing everyday objects for specific projects: large cardboard boxes, plastic 5-gallon buckets, dowel rods of varying sizes, sections of PVC pipe, bolts of fabric, discarded household items (lamps, toasters, silverware, toys), coffee cans, #10 cans from university food service, donated craft supply odds-and-ends (artificial flowers, yarn, felt, glue), rope, spools of wire, copy paper boxes, and any other items that might fit into the Idea Closet could be collected. This rotating collection should be refreshed periodically, getting rid of materials that have not been used and replacing these with newly collected objects.

The Idea Closet itself should be well-lit and fitted with heavy-duty industrial shelving from floor to ceiling. All stored items should be kept in labeled bins for the sake of maintaining organization and ease of finding a desired object. Ideally, the bins should be transparent so that their contents would be easy to see—things stored in opaque containers might not be found or used, even if the container is labeled appropriately.

In the adjoining classroom, a space could be designated as a gallery for display of visual works. This wall could be equipped with panels allowing for easy mounting of artworks, and several pedestals for display of three dimensional works could be stored in the Idea Closet until they were needed. Providing display space for created objects would not only allow students to share the things they have created, but would also present these things to a wider audience comprised of others who used this space, perhaps subtly promoting the value or appeal of the courses in which the works were created.

Innovation and creativity are often accomplished through simply being able to explore, to experiment, and to physically work with objects. Therefore, the accessibility of the items stored in the Idea Closet is a valuable facet of this resource. In working with these items, students may find that new thinking begins to emerge or new ways of looking at things could develop. Perhaps most people can remember how much fun it was to play with a big cardboard box when they were small children: this same joy of discovery and creation could be initiated through the items in the Idea Closet, paired with sufficient access, time, participation with peers, and encouragement from the instructor.

The concept behind this resource is to provide uncomplicated access to the materials and equipment that might be necessary to a given creative process or that might serve as inspiration or the spark of a new innovation or idea. Imagination can sometimes be best served by increasing opportunity and proximity to materials, brought to life through the resources made available in this simple storage space.

Clearly, not every material resource imaginable could be stored in this closet. For some projects or processes, students would have to seek out supplies beyond what is normally made available to them in this space. However, the variety of the items kept in stock, and their relationship to creative explorations in movement, music, and materials—to facilitate dance, theatrical expression, music-making, or the creation of visual artworks or designed objects—could be an important component of an educational program featuring integrated or transdisciplinary curriculum.

Admittedly, a space such as this, not to mention procuring all of the items to stock it, is something that could probably only be fully accomplished with generous budgetary support. It does, however, perhaps provide a starting point for the conversation about what kinds material resources might be beneficial in a transdisciplinary collaborative space that keeps an eye on the needs of creative activity as well as providing typical space to sit, listen, read, and write as is usual elsewhere in the university environment.

By allowing room for students to investigate materials, movement, and music—to be loud and messy, active and energetic, thoughtful and creative, collaborative and introspective, and to display their creations—we can perhaps unleash students' latent creativity, providing opportunities for learning in un-traditional yet highly valuable ways. ■