

THIRTY BRAVE MINUTES – CREATIVITY PODCAST TEXT

Hello and welcome to thirty brave minutes, a podcast of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. In Thirty Brave Minutes we will give you something interesting to think about. Our topic today is creativity. Joining us are Jessica Pitchford, Carla Rokes, Holden Hansen, Aaron Vandermeer and Terrence Dollard. Your host for Thirty Brave Minutes is Jeff Frederick, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

Frederick: Creativity comes in many forms. From the delicate and yet powerful steps, jumps, and landings of a ballerina, to the transporting power of a novel, to take a reader a thousand miles away and back again in a sea of word pictures so real and powerful that putting the book down becomes a physical impossibility. Who among us doesn't marvel at the work of the great masters when you stroll through the North Carolina Museum of Art or the High in Atlanta? A day without music for me is like a day without sunshine and for every mood, event or sentiment, we have a playlist or a core set of go-to songs to get us up, mellow us out or just give us something to think about. In a 1929 interview with the Saturday Evening Post, Albert Einstein noted that imagination, a starting point of the creative process, is as critical to him as a scientist as it would be to anyone in the more traditional humanities. "I am enough of the artist," the physicist argued, "to draw freely upon my imagination." Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited; imagination encircles the world. Modern media has put the work product of artists of all stripes at our fingertips. Songs, paintings, drama, stand-up comedy, film, comic books, culinary arts, anime and so many other forms and functions of the creative process are now carried with us for quick sampling as the need and mood requires. 1.3 billion Movie tickets were sold in 2016 at an average price hovering closer and closer to nine dollars. A study in tech time suggested as many as 57 million Americans illegally downloaded songs last year to one of their devices, an indication of just how much we want access to our music, the music that we crave, or perhaps that another unique form of American creativity is simply circumventing the law. In short, we are addicted to art in one form or another. Among the most beguiling elements of the creative

work of artists is the sense of wonder it provides, whether it is a play at GPAC, a performance of one of our choirs, ensembles, or jazz groups, or a tour through the Locklear A.D. Gallery, art in all of its forms on our campus, and beyond, connects us to a sense of wonder and appreciation for the elements of invention and genius that make a society worth living in. Who hasn't stopped to say, at one time or another, "how did they do that?" Artistry fills our thoughts, frames our conceptualization of the real and the symbolic, informs our judgments, provokes us, soothes us and transports us. Our topic for today: Artistry and Creativity. Joining me today are five UNCP faculty who teach, mentor, research, serve and create. Artistry and creativity comes in many forms and across many platforms. For today's discussion we have a creative writer, Jessica Pitchford; a visual artist, Carla Rokes; an actor-director, Holden Hansen; a musician, Aaron Vandermeer; and a media specialist and comic-book artist, Terrence Dollard. Each of our panel are teachers, each are scholars, and each are artists. Let's get started this way: describe the creative process that you undertake in each of your own areas of expertise. Jessica?

Pitchford: Jeff, that was a great introduction and it is super-fun to be in a small, enclosed space with a bunch of artists. It's sort of a dream for a lot of artists. You mentioned in our various disciplines we are, of course, the artists in this room also being creative at the same time that we are working and being teachers. I have to wonder, of course, if it is an individualized process, right? This notion of tapping into creativity and how you are productive at the same time that you are also being professional. I think for me, as a writer, I get a lot of inspiration from my students, but also from place in the world around me. I think of writing as a daily practice in empathy, and that is what I try to convey to my students, as well. It's about living through another characters shoes and paying attention to the world around you.

Rokes: My form of creativity lies in visual arts and so creativity and visual arts is often an immersive process. Quite often, when you put yourself in a studio space, you lose your sense of self. Some people call it a flow state, where you lose sense of time or place. I suppose creativity for visual artists is about finding that place

where somewhere between thinking and producing where you can lose yourself in your process of the act of making. For me, drawing, painting, and digital arts are my media, and my process involves blending those to deconstruct and reconstruct and recontextualize an image to create an interchangeable narrative. For me the creative process is about that immersive experience of losing a sense of self, in a way.

Vandermeer: I think for the musician, it can be different, depending on what you are doing, whether you are composing or whether you are performing notes on a page with other musicians, or whether you are improvising. I think all of those creative processes can manifest themselves differently. I think what it comes down to is a single point for all the musicians. I think the creative process begins with listening for inspiration. If you are a jazz musician, you want to do an existing song differently than it has been done before. Still, listening, listening, listening, to other styles of music, other musicians. Maybe even seeing visual art can all help, because that can translate into rhythm, like it famously has for Beethoven, when he would go on long walks and hear birds chirping. That would be the rhythm or pitch for him. For the jazz musician, who is the improviser, you are really just trying to hear sound in the moment and keep all of your senses awake.

Cannonball Adderley, the great Saxophonist used to keep his eyes wandering around the room and if he saw a lady in a red dress walk in, he would perhaps quote a song that had a lady in a red dress, for a theme. So I guess it just boils down to keeping your ears open.

Dollard: When you are working in television you are working with a lot of other people, so you have to be able to take your ideas and make it something that you can explain to a group of people who help you realize your vision. So, even if you are working on a documentary, or a music video, you still need people to either be your subject, and that requires all the prepping and the planning and the phone calls. So, it is always a challenge to get to the point where you can actually be creative because you do so much administrative work prior to that. That is why when I get home, I like to draw comics because the only person I have to explain it to is myself, and sometimes I understand that. Other times it is just a bunch of

lines that you erase. It is a great outlet that kind of is a two-dimensional TV substitute. So, in terms of creativity it would be great, as Aaron was saying, listen to the rest of your ensemble and maybe pick something up. In television, you have to sort of come up with that vision and be able to translate it to a group and work on it sometimes months after you have had that initial thought.

Hansen: Well, I guess I was asked to participate in this because I am a theatre practitioner, but my first instinct in thinking about creativity was that it isn't just in the domain of the arts. Creativity is necessary for non-artistic activity. I find myself spending more time on non-artistic activity than I do artistic activity in my job as a faculty member. So my next step was to sort of think about... It seems my creativity engages when I'm writing proposals for curriculum changes, when I'm trying to figure out how to teach a concept, and that requires a lot of thinking. Once the thinking is done, then it seems like I start moving into a non-thinking mode and I think that is sort of related to flow, as Carla was talking about. I believe that when I work on a play and with actors, I am engaged in this thinking, but then it eventually moves into this mode of not thinking. So that is how I relate to creativity.

Frederick: One of the things that we all suffer with, whether we are trying to be creative for a living or just trying to get to a finish line, is the inevitable creative barrier. You have the makings of an imagination or a vision to lead you in some direction, but something is stopping you. What do each of you all do individually, in your own work, when you get to that place where you are stuck and you need to break through a barrier?

Dollard: Well, I find if I am writing a script, or editing a project, and it just doesn't seem to be going anywhere I try and get to a point where I have said all I can say at that moment, and then I will do anything else for half an hour or so. Whether it is pick up an instrument and play music for a while, or walk the dog, or if I'm at work, go around and talk to a colleague. I got a piece of advice years ago, from a professor, who worked as a professional screenwriter. His advice was when you get stuck, do something else because your mind will solve the problem without

you even trying. I find that actually works. I will just go out and do anything else, like grocery shopping. When I come back, maybe I have one little piece that will get the avalanche started and I will get back to work again.

Vandermeer: I think Terrence put that really well. That translates very well to music, at least in my experience. One thing that musicians have tried to get out of ruts is they have tried practicing fourteen or sixteen hours a day. Sometimes that can work as if they are going to will themselves out of that rut, and sometimes it causes physical problems and they keep digging deeper into their rut. Some musicians have historically tried drugs and gotten deep into drugs, as Charlie Parker did. That was a rut that he couldn't get out of. He died when he was thirty-four. I think it all comes back again, to just listening to different types of music, because musicians have been stuck in ruts forever. Beethoven was not always writing his A material, as my teacher David Baker used to remind me frequently. The answers are in the sound that is now, as Jeff mentioned, very easy for us to access. Then, of course we have our colleagues, too, who have been there before and they know the way out of the hole sometimes. Yeah, between listening and talking to colleagues, I think that is a good way out of creative ruts.

Hansen: I try not to force things. I try to have patience. I know that eventually it is going to come just from experience I know that is going to happen, so I think that is basically it. I try to have patience and I try to get plenty of sleep.

Frederick: I'm going to be patient, and I'm going to be patient right now.

Rokes: Usually when I come across a creative barrier, it is because I am overthinking it. Quite often what I try to do is just kind of pull back and either go for a walk, observe art, go to a museum, or gallery, listen to music, spend time with my children, because they are a huge source of inspiration. Also, I just do some automatic drawing or something that pulls ideas from my subconscious and not really try to think about it too much, because process is really what matters and getting back into the actual making and not trying to think about the concept too much is what I try to do.

Pitchford: My mom says that a walk will solve any problem, so I go on a lot of walks. I also had a mentor long ago, who said there is no such thing as writer's block, it is just laziness. I think there is some truth to that. You can always find a way out of a creative rut, whether it is getting physically outside of your space or doing something different. I think students often want prescriptive advice, so how can I be super-productive, how can I publish this? And of course, it is a subjective process. You find the regimen that works for you. Some writers write in spurts, and others go (I am more in this camp) for months, sometimes, without really working on a longer project. Just being open to the experience and the muse, if you will, when it comes. Also, prompts and writing exercises. So we do a lot in my classes and workshops, with fixed form narratives. Sometimes having that prescriptive direction so you have to work within a set word count or base it off a particular image, or go on a walk and record what you see. Sometimes that can generate creativity when you weren't pointedly looking for it.

Dollard: I do a lot of interviews with comic book writers and artists who have a deadline every month. They have to do however many scripts, or however many pages they have to draw. The one thing they always say is that when they get stuck, they just have to keep working, and trust that eventually the talent will come through and what they are trying to do will be ok, because after all, they are professionals. I had one colleague say something about no one has plumbers block. You never hear about the plumber who cannot work, and say "I just don't feel the pipes." So, you are not an aspiring jogger; you either jog or you don't. A lot of the pros that I have spoken to usually just say, when it doesn't feel right, you just keep working and trust that you will go back to it and fix it later on, but you will force your way through it.

Frederick: That kind leads me to another idea. I deal with this when I am trying to write and to try to connect some ideas to some real people who lived in the past. How do you know when something you are working on is done? How do you know when you have gotten to the point where you are like, "OK, this is what I imagined." When do you stop grinding to get it to where you want and when do you say, "OK, it's done."?

Vandermeer: That is a great question and I think, especially for improvising musicians, there is no real concept of being done. Improvisation is a lifelong pursuit and it evolves as you evolve, so in that way there is no concept of being done. But for a composer, perhaps, I can imagine that it is a lot like being a visual artist, and you hear about the brushstroke that ruined the painting. I think that composers get to be like that, too, but if we are going to live and work in the economy we eventually need to be done and move to the next thing. I think it is more of a temporal thing of "when is this done", and "when is it not" and you have to move on. I could be working on something forever.

Rokes: Yeah. I agree with Aaron. Not to be using a cliché, but it will tell you when it's done. Usually when you finish a work, you just know the moment you finish it that you don't need to add anything or edit anything out. So that's what I rely on - my instinct as an artist - to speak to that. For digital media you can several variations of a work and really have many different options, so it depends on the process and material that you are using.

Hanson: In the theatre there is a deadline. It's opening night....

Frederick: The show must go on.

Hanson: As a director you are sort of done by opening night. As an actor, however, you continue to be in the show night after night and we try to create the illusion that it is happening for the first time. Each work of art, night after night, it changes depending on the audience. So, I suppose that as an actor you are not ever really done; you are just sort of constantly creating it in the moment.

Dollard: I think what Holden was saying makes a lot of sense. For television, if the news is supposed to go on at six o'clock, it doesn't matter if you don't feel like going on at six o'clock. It has to be six o'clock, so you have all of your work done before then. So the work is either done when the client hands you the check, and that commercial goes on the air, whether or not you are totally pleased with it, or when the deadline is for the air date. If it something that I am working on very personally, I usually give myself several deadlines, so I can put it down for a few

weeks and look at it with a fresh set of eyes, because I tend to lose perspective staring at the screen for days or hours at a time. So, if I can look at it later, I can make changes and say, "Oh, this works," or "This doesn't work." I keep tweaking it but then the end result is that you are never finished and they put you in a pine box.

Frederick: Carla, a few moments ago you mentioned that you could find inspiration from your kids. Where else do you all find inspiration and when you get it, if it doesn't come at a time when you can immediately do something with it, how do you hold onto that moment.

Rokes: I usually find it from contemporary art. I love to go to museums and galleries and just look at art. Quite often, I will just carry a sketchbook with me and write it down. I have a terrible memory, so I have to write things down. And then, draw. I will go to a museum or gallery and sit and draw ideas out, break the composition down by shape, movement and colors, and just kind of re-synthesize it. It gives me ideas and that is where I draw inspiration.

Hanson: Well, I'm directing "*Uncle Vanya*" right now and in this particular production I am drawing a huge amount of inspiration from a film that was done in the early 90s called *Vanya on 42nd Street*. They are actually using the same text that I am using and I'm not bashful about stealing ideas whenever I can. Of course we sort of use it as a spring board, and we jump off from that. It kind of takes on a life of its own. I also teach my acting students that they can draw inspiration from each other and their acting partner. If they are not open to that, if they are sort of working too much solo on their own on the stage, they are liable to not find inspiration. But if they are tuned in to their acting partner, they will discover that the work of acting comes quite easy because you are just responding in the moment to what the other actor is doing.

Vandermeer: For most musicians, the way they find inspiration is simply from listening to other musicians. Beautiful sounds and impressive technique, and outside the preferred genre for the musician, too, is a great thing. I can always go and hear someone and say, "Wow! I haven't thought of that; I haven't heard that

sound before. I really like the way they did this tune; that sound was amazing." That is always a good inspiration. Dizzy Gillespie made an interesting comment one time. He said, "I'm not really that interested in music. I'm interested in sound." He made the distinction between music and sound, which I think was a very creative way to think about what he was hearing and what he was putting into his own music.

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Frederick: Let's shift gears a little bit because I think teaching is by its nature a creative process or at least it certainly should be. And you all are in the unique position of helping to teach people how to be creative, not just to understand a certain flow or a certain process, but how to do that organically on their own. How do you teach people to be creative?

Vandermeer: For me, the vehicle of the jazz combo is an inherently perfect vehicle for teaching creativity, because it is not desirable in jazz to do something the same way that it has been done. You need to learn the way that it has been done, but you are encouraged to have a different voice. You don't need to sound like every other guitar player or you don't need to sound like every trumpet player. Every sound, every voice, individually is valued in jazz and you don't want to duplicate someone else. So, I think as a pedagogue, the most important thing I can do is actually step out of the way of the students. I think that creativity is inherent in all human beings and I think the process of a student sitting in a

classroom and the authority-figure teacher standing up in front telling him what he needs to know, in many ways stifles creativity. Even though we are bestowing knowledge and giving him hints that this is important and you need to learn this. At some point I think, as an educator, you need to step out of the way. Once you do, the students fill up that space with their own thoughts and experience. Sometimes I will just sit in a combo rehearsal totally silent and watch the students act. They come up with all kinds of great ideas that I wouldn't have thought of. That has been a good lesson for me, that sometimes the best thing I can do as an educator is stay out of the way.

Rokes: You can teach technique and skill, and as students build their skill they build their confidence, but teaching them creativity is a challenge. Basically, what that is to me is encouraging them to be curious, relentless, persevere, move through doubts and take risks. That is what we do as artists. We just have to have faith that we can do what drives us and not question it and creativity is definitely something that you have to develop from within and many of the students pick that up as they develop their skills. Their skill sets strengthen their process. They just kind of start intuitively to make from a place within.

Hanson: I don't think I can teach creativity. I heard parts of both of your answers that I can identify with. I think you can enable it and encourage it, but I just think that creativity is something that we are born with, not something that can be taught necessarily.

Frederick: I think the arts are a fundamental part of a college education, of any education for that matter. I think they teach meaning, abstract thought. I think people who have an appreciation for art in all of its forms think more creatively. I think they are better problem solvers and they think more deeply and more critically about any range of things. Let me give you all a chance to answer that question. Tell me why the arts are critical to a college education?

Rokes: Well, art space learning is critical. I know STEM is a very important topic among college campuses and administrators, but art space learning is important because it encourages soft skills, observation, listening, working collaboratively a

variety of diverse people to solve a problem and thinking outside of the box. Art space learning promotes that kind of activity among students. I also believe that careers are changing and many of the skills that students are going to need in the future will require creative thinking and I think Art Space learning is crucial.

Hanson: Back in the early 90s I worked at the Arts Council of Fayetteville. I became curious about Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences which includes intra-personal, inter-personal, kinesthetic, spacial, logical, mathematical - I can't name them all - but I grew enamored of these ideas because I sense that I have all of these intelligences, that we all have all of these intelligences. I think that the arts, more than other subject matters engage the kinesthetic, the spacial, the intra-personal, the inter-personal, so I think that promotes that kind of learning. It helps to build those intelligences that all humans have.

Vandermeer: I think that one of the things that I would add is that the arts are really, along with mathematics, seem like the only universal language. They are the only commodity, where you can go into the middle of Russia with, and have people understand you, or perhaps not understand you, but attempt to communicate with you in a non-verbal language that does not require you to be able to cognate the words being said. Now there are other kinds of cognition. You cognate a beautiful melody and music works in the brain in the same way that language does and is really another language. But I see that really translating among visual art, dance, and theatre. Meaning can be enhanced if you understand that a language is being spoken, but there is plenty of beauty there without it.

Rokes: I really appreciated your response about the kinesthetic experience because you are in theatre and I think that truly is important, but also I think that art-based learning is important because it produces leaders. I think that taking risks, being innovative, and seeing something to fruition and bringing it to full circle takes creativity. That is another thought I had.

Frederick: Let's close with a final question going in a little different direction. Each of you are artists. Talk about one artist, maybe living or dead, that you would love

to have worked alongside with, or to have spent some time, at the very least, talking with. Who would be that person for each of you?

Vandermeer: That one is easy for me, even though there are a great number of people to choose from. I would choose Louis Armstrong. He is very interesting to me because he came up in the worst of situations and ended up in the best of situations and brought happiness and joy to people around the world. He became very wealthy but really never displayed or abused his wealth. He grew up poor in New Orleans. He didn't have shoes. The streets were made of broken oyster shells. His mother had to work sometimes as a part-time prostitute to feed her children. He got arrested when he was twelve for firing a gun into the sky on New Year's Eve, as was customary, but the white policeman didn't like a young black man doing this, so they hauled him off to the home for colored waifs, where he really got into music and went from one instrument to the other and by the end of the year, after he had picked up his coronet, and his heroes were cornetists, he was leading the band, walking around town and became really the king of the city before he was 18. Then he went up to Chicago and the rest is history. The State Department used him as a Good Will Ambassador. He brought the passion and the joy and the sound of freedom to people across the world. He really exemplified that in his life.

Hanson: I have always had the fantasy of being in a rock band. I'm not a musician, so if I may - David Bowie, Bob Dylan, Neil Young. None of these people are in my discipline, but as far as theatre is concerned, probably it is the person whose work I am working on at the moment, so I'll just say Anton Chekov. He was ahead of his time; he wrote a subtler form of realism with startling climaxes, where suicides and gunshots were in plays. He had a kind of tragi-comic vision of the world, which I share, that life is rather absurd, and therefore comic, but also tragic because we sort of get up every day and struggle and we don't really know to what end that may be, so I would really like to get into Anton's head and talk to him about those kinds of things, I suppose.

Rokes: That is a really difficult question, because there are a lot of influences. I'm doing two different types of work right now: Experimental film and collage. My collage pieces are influenced by a Venezuelan-based artist, Arturo Herrera. His work is really about process. It is figurative abstraction, which is what I am doing, but so much is a trompe l'oeil effect, like what is real and what is photographed. His process is very interesting to me and so I am really studying that. And Stan Breckenridge, another artist from the 60s, who produced really interesting films involving light and direct animation on 16 mm film. I am really studying their process now, not so much their background, but they are both very interesting to me.

Frederick: This has been great fun today. A special thanks to our panel of artists and thanks to all of you for listening to Thirty Brave Minutes. I hope we gave you something to think about. We will be back next month with another topic from the College of Arts and Sciences.

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