

# Encouraging Creativity in the Social Work Classroom: Insights from a Qualitative Exploration

Abbie Kirkendall & Anjala S. Krishen

*Creativity is vital to the learning process of social work students. Despite its importance, educators are still uncertain of ways to enhance creativity and translate it from classroom to practice. Therefore, this study examines social work student perspectives on ways to define creativity, infuse it into the classroom, and apply it as practitioners. This study qualitatively explores the open-ended insights of 37 social work students. Through an unguided semantic analysis and application of Kolb's experiential learning theory, the following themes emerged: classroom, creativity, performance, activities, and ideas. These themes indicate that students believe that additional creative opportunities in their classrooms would eventually benefit them as practitioners. Further pedagogical emphasis on increasing student creativity through experiential learning activities would be beneficial.*

*Keywords: Creativity; Education; Social Work; Classroom; Encouragement; Qualitative Analysis; Experiential Learning Theory; Active Learning*

## Introduction

Creativity is associated with unpredictability, using one's imagination, original thinking, doing something in a way that has never been done, and taking initiative to name a few definitions (Abdul Halim, Kingsbury, & Drage, 2013). Feeding knowledge to students through single modalities such as lectures does not serve the ever changing world; that is why creativity is an increasingly valued aspect in education (Shaheen, 2010). Recently, the social work field has been examining ways in which creativity in the classroom can benefit students' learning and practice (Martin & Pyles, 2013).

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Creativity can be implemented in the classroom in several ways, using projects such as essays, poetry, paintings, photography, and so on. Another possible way to enhance creativity would be to have interdisciplinary teams from social work, marketing, and social sciences collaborate. Such teams would serve to expand perspectives and provide new and unique ways of discovering solutions to problems. Utilizing multiple modalities would provide social work students with the ability to reach wider audiences, further empowering their ideas.

Instead of forcing students to learn in a prescribed way, creativity allows them to develop personalized and self-selected learning processes. In addition, creativity allows students to develop their own perceptions and increases their self-awareness, especially in relation to their beliefs regarding social issues such as homelessness and addictions (Phillips, MacGiollari, & Callaghan, 2012). Creativity in the classroom also encourages students to engage more fully in the learning process and discover additional meaning in their work, which results in lengthened retention of knowledge.

When students create emotional connections to their learning materials, research shows that they are further inspired to take social action and advocacy (Phillips et al., 2012). For example, Cree et al. (2006) discuss an exercise within which a group of social work students were required to compose a diary entry about the experience of a child with a parent who had HIV; this learning experience serves to act as a way of assessing the child's needs. Whereas assessments can often be a perfunctory task checked off on a list, this particular assignment allows the students to experience what the child is feeling. As a result of this exercise, many of the students reflected upon their experience with a loved one who had a terminal illness, further developing their empathy (Cree et al., 2006). This example, in addition to field trips to homeless shelters or a local hospice, shows the importance of creativity in encouraging students to put a face, voice, and story to the social issue and foster an emotional connection.

The development of a student's creativity can be instrumental in finding solutions to social issues that may have never been previously encountered (Eadie & Lymbery, 2007; Moxley, Feen-Calligan, & Washington, 2012). For instance, when working with children, standard therapy may not always function appropriately because they are not always willing to openly discuss their troubles. In order to combat this challenge, clinicians can instead conduct play therapy as a creative technique for increasing a child's ability to communicate their issues and needs (Clausen, Ruff, Wiederhold, & Heineman, 2012). Another population in which creativity can be useful is with those who have communication challenges such as individuals with intellectual disabilities. To illustrate, individuals with intellectual disabilities were shown a picture of a woman who was described as having a terminal illness and were then asked to share what the woman needed to be comfortable during this time. This method allowed the individuals to find a way to communicate their wishes for end-of-life care (Tuffrey-Wijne, 2013; Tuffrey-Wijne, Bernal, Butler, Hollins, & Curfs, 2007).

Social work education benefits from an emphasis on being able to think 'outside the box' through creative means (Eadie & Lymbery, 2007). In a field such as social work, where unpredictability is common, being flexible in one's approach is valued. Various modalities of creativity in the classroom are particularly important to the social work

field because they enable a deeper understanding of the behavior and actions of individuals who require assistance. Creativity also has been suggested to foster a higher level of independence and the willingness to take the initiative, both of which are valuable skills when faced with complex social issues that require advocacy (Eadie & Lymbery, 2007).

Despite the apparent usefulness of creativity in the classroom, research indicates that there is resistance, particularly in research classes, due to the belief that research is typically focused on quantitative methods; such techniques may not readily promote sharing the story behind the participants. In contrast, Phillips et al. (2012) argue that qualitative research allows for more creativity, because it shares the narratives of the involved participants and thus should be more valued as a method of inquiry. The goal of the current study is to assess student perspectives in the following ways: (1) how they define creativity in their own words; (2) their ideas on how creativity can be infused into the classroom environment; and (3) how they feel that creativity in the classroom can benefit them as practitioners. Utilizing these perspectives, the paper then aims to provide a guiding framework which merges these three sets of ideas to propose a set of pedagogical techniques to enhance creativity.

### Theory

Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984) emphasizes the role of engagement and experience in the learning process. Experiential learning theory is explained through six common characteristics that originate from the works of Dewey, Piaget, and Lewin (Kolb, 1984). The first characteristic suggests that learning is a process, and therefore ideas are dynamic and ever changing, based on the experiences of the learner. The goal should not be to memorize information but instead to have students be able to develop and become familiar with their process of learning.

The second characteristic views learning as a process that involves unlearning or relearning. The synthesis of information is influenced by what the learner already knows. Therefore, the goal of the educator is to assist the learner in the development of new beliefs that broaden and deepen their scope of knowledge and perspective (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

The third characteristic is the idea that learning involves the amelioration of conflict between opposing views of the world. Accordingly, conflict is resolved through confrontations between four models of experiential learning that are: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. These models are defined such that: (1) concrete experience refers to the assimilation of information from experience; (2) reflective observation consists of internal reflection or taking action on the attained knowledge; (3) abstract conceptualization includes the learner's ability to explain the knowledge; and (4) active experimentation is application of the knowledge (Svinicki & Dixon, 1987). The fourth characteristic pertains to learning as encompassing thought as well as the experience of feelings, perceptions, and behaviors. The fifth characteristic relates to the fact that learning involves the interaction between the person and their

environment. Lastly, the sixth characteristic involves the process of actually creating knowledge (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

The application of Kolb's experiential learning theory in conjunction with the importance of using creativity in the education of social workers supports the notion that learning is an active process (Comerford, 2005). The difference between active and passive learning is that in active learning, students play a role in the learning process often through an activity (e.g. field work, role plays, and community projects) while passive learning often involves listening to a lecture (Prince, 2004). Active learning requires students to not simply read about a social issue but also create ways for students to indirectly experience the social issue so that they develop an emotional connection and thereby increase their empathy. In particular, encouraging students to engage their surrounding community is a goal of most social work programs and reflects the experiential learning theory characteristic of the interaction between people and their environment. This approach moves the learning domain beyond the classroom and into the community. Such techniques would involve social work students in assessing the needs of their surrounding communities and mobilizing resources to ameliorate the gaps in services. Providing resources often requires social workers to act as mediators between partnering organizations; in turn, this need requires engagement skills. This type of active learning for social workers is invaluable as the majority of social work roles involve engaging on various levels, whether it is with an individual, a community, or society.

### **Qualitative Study**

The aim of the study is to gather students' perspectives regarding the important aspects of creativity in the classroom and the student views of the importance of creativity.

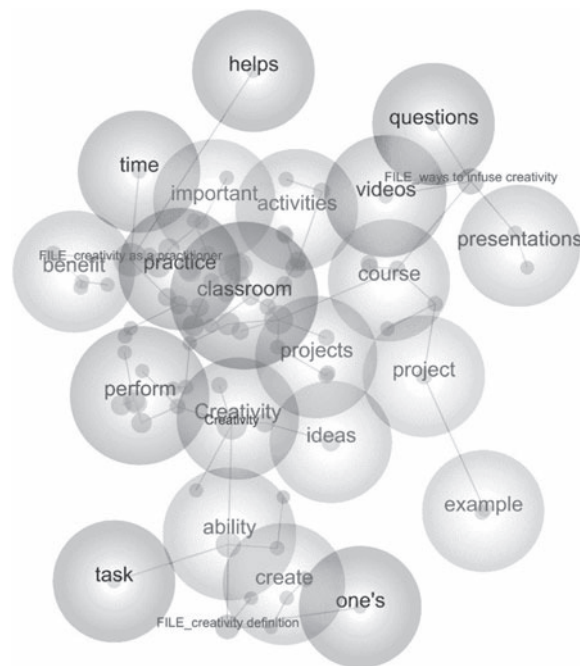
#### *Participants and Procedure*

Participants of the study consisted of a total of 37 (28 females and nine males, mean age = 30.21) undergraduate students from a large state-supported university in the western part of the United States; they were enrolled in multiple social work courses and voluntarily completed the survey for course credit. In all courses in which the survey was administered, the procedure and instructor were consistent. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Nevada Las Vegas. Extra credit was offered to students for completing the questions. Students were allowed to opt out at any time during the data collection. The survey was administered just prior to the end of the semester during class time and included open-ended questions as follows. (1) Please define creativity in your own words. (2) How do you feel that creativity in the classroom will benefit you as a practitioner? (3) How could creativity be infused more heavily into classroom projects and lectures? Students were allowed to write as much as they wished when answering each of the questions.

### Analysis

To understand the qualitative feedback from students, we chose to use a semantic analysis tool which would provide an unguided view of the ideas contained across the students. To do so, we utilized a lexicographic content analyzer called Leximancer. Using a machine learning technique, Leximancer ([www.leximancer.com](http://www.leximancer.com)) discovers the underlying concepts and themes within verbal data (Smith, 2007). Multiple studies, both academic and practitioner in nature, contain content analysis performed using this software analytic tool (e.g. Angus, Rintel, & Wiles, 2013; Dann, 2010; Krishen, Raschke, Kachroo, LaTour, & Verma, 2014; Kuyini, Alhassan, & Mahama, 2011). Based on Bayesian theory, the algorithm for this tool derives concepts and themes that in general conform to and augment those derived by qualitative researchers, in particular because of the complex graphical maps provided (Rooney, 2005). Due to the exploratory nature of our inquiry, our choice of this semantic analysis tool provides initial insights which are iterative and do not rely on human coding (Atkinson, 1992). The semantic analysis tool creates concept maps based on derived themes; and within each theme, maps stimulate focal ideas. Researchers can interpret these maps and derive any key ideas from them.

Analysis involved examination of each question independently and also for any similarities between them. Figure 1 provides themes and their relationship with each of the three questions, shown as FILE\_ways to infuse creativity and FILE\_creativity definition and FILE\_creativity as a practitioner. When defining creativity, the



**Figure 1** Emergent Themes.

following themes emerged: *task, create, ability, ideas, and perform*. For the description of ways to infuse creativity the following were identified: *questions, videos, presentations, projects, and activities*. Lastly, for how creativity can be beneficial for the social work student as a practitioner the following were identified: *benefit, perform, helps, time, and important*. Figure 2 provides a bar chart view of the major themes discovered in the three questions. For defining creativity, concepts such as *original, art, express, ability, imagination, and different* emerged. For ways to infuse creativity concepts such as *questions, groups, engaging, presentation, videos, and activities* were identified. For ways in which creativity can be beneficial for practitioners the following concepts were revealed: *knowledge, solutions, clients, perspective, courage, and changes*. The following section provides a more in-depth examination of the themes and concepts illustrated from student comments that are displayed in Table 1. Table 2 displays a bar chart that provides the relative frequency by percentage, the strength, and the importance of each concept pertaining to each question.

### Classroom

The theme of *classroom* involves the concepts of heavily, lectures, practice, knowledge, and easier. According to the students' comments, creativity allows for individuality and personal expression which builds confidence and empowers social workers to be advocates. A student comment illustrates how creativity fosters independent thinking:

Allows you to find out what works for you and to find comfort in knowing that your creativity makes you, you.

It can be interpreted that when creativity is present in the classroom, students feel more engaged in the learning process. Creativity is also a valued aspect in practice because it prepares a person to be flexible, which is helpful when working with individuals from diverse backgrounds. The words of a student demonstrate:

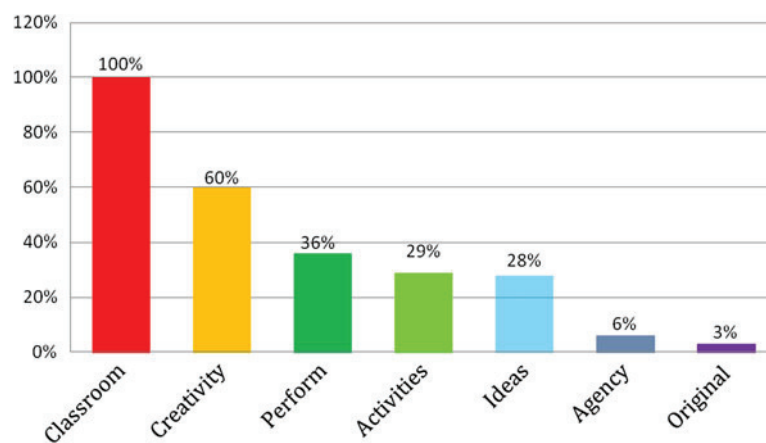


Figure 2 Theme Weights.

**Table 1** Themes and Concepts Sample Comments ( $N = 37$ )

Theme	Key concept	Sample comment
Classroom	Classroom	I feel that the diversity in the classroom prepares us for our practice.
	Heavily	Allows you to find out what works for you and to find comfort in knowing that your creativity makes you, you.
	Lectures	More interactive activities like this make the classroom an exciting environment rather than just answering questions from lecture notes.
	Practice	Creativity is a part of every practitioner because when working with people it is impossible to know what to expect. All we can do is use the code of ethics and our creativity to implement the life of others.
	Knowledge	I think being able to express my creativity in the classroom has given me the knowledge and courage to become a political activist to make real changes regarding policies in organization and in congress.
Creativity	Easier	Creativity in the classroom benefits me as a practitioner by letting me practice applying my skills and using my imagination in various ways such as doing hands-on activities or answering different possible future social work scenarios.
	Strict	Creativity in the classroom teaches me to think 'outside the box' and makes me think outside my normal perspective. This will further my knowledge in working with the diverse individuals I will encounter in my career.
	Different	Creativity is infused because each class member does things differently and then brings it to class. I have seen where I have done a project differently because of being influenced by classmates.
	Learning	Creativity is doing something outside of what is considered the normal course of action. That doesn't mean it hasn't been done before but that it is different from what the individual/group/class has done before.
Perform	Doing	Creativity in the classroom allows me to practice incorporating creative ways of doing things on a daily basis. I will be more comfortable using creative techniques as a practitioner if I am provided practice of these techniques.
	Box	Ability to think, perform a task or speak in a manner that is different from the norm; outside of the box.
	Normal	Because it will allow me to think out of the box; giving clients creative projects or exercises builds connections and promotes healing.
Activities	Courage	I would have never thought of doing something bigger than psychotherapy, but now I know that a social worker's role is not limited to one profession.
	Activities	Throughout the semester, I have to say the best creative thing we did was the egg activity which demonstrated roles.
	Groups	Student presentations and in-class small groups.
	Infused	Creativity is infused because each class member does things differently and then brings it to class. I have seen where I have done a project differently because of being influenced by classmates.
	Engaging	The info-video on the ACA was fantastic. They're short, engaging, and informative without being dragging.
	Informative	I think it's always important, whether working with staff or clients, to use a variety of teaching methods to cater to different learning styles and to keep things fresh and engaging. I do this in my current practice and this is a reminder to continue doing so, and to also be on the lookout for fresh ideas in engaging groups.

*(continued)*



**Table 1** (Continued)

Theme	Key concept	Sample comment
Ideas	Ideas	Brown says, vulnerability in creating a brand new idea or work product. Creativity requires us to stand, with our new ideas, and risk being judged.
	Ways	For example, an open assignment about any topic that relates to the class. An assignment like that would bring in unique ideas from each student that may enhance the other students' understanding and might even give the professor ideas about new ways of presenting and discussing the topic.

Creativity is a part of every practitioner because when working with people it is impossible to know what to expect. All we can do is use the code of ethics and our creativity to implement change in the life of others.

### *Creativity*

The theme of *creativity* includes concepts such as: strict, different, learning, and doing. The concept 'different' suggests that students value exposure to different perspectives through creativity. As such, encompassing exercises which fall outside of normative classroom activities (e.g. lecture, research paper) can inspire creativity. The classroom is viewed as a safe environment within which to practice creativity and recognize how readily creativity translates into practice. The following student comment shows this aspect:

Creativity is doing something outside of what is considered the normal course of action. That doesn't mean it hasn't been done before but that it is different from what the individual/group/class has done before. Creativity in the classroom allows me to practice incorporating creative ways of doing things on a daily basis. I will be more comfortable using creative techniques as a practitioner if I am provided practice of these techniques in the classroom.

### *Perform*

The theme of *perform* incorporates key concepts of box, normal, and courage. One of the students relates the use of creativity as a way of connecting on a deeper level with clients. Another student discusses the use of creativity as a way of broadening his or her view of social work as a profession, namely, it has many more opportunities that go beyond individual counseling. The following student describes what he or she means by 'outside of the box':











































Ability to think, perform a task or speak in a manner that is different from the norm; outside of the box.

### *Activities*

The theme of *activities* comprises concepts such as groups, infused, engaging, and informative. Within this theme, activities are associated with bringing creativity into



**Table 2** Compound Concepts across Creativity Components

Concept	Practitioner			Definition			Infusing		
	Rel Freq (%)	Prominence	Concept	Rel Freq (%)	Prominence	Concept	Rel Freq (%)	Prominence	Concept
Problem & techniques	3		73.0 Art & improve	3		73.0 Engaging & informative	6		55.3
Problem & situations	3		73.0 Courage & solutions	3		73.0 Agency & trips	6		55.3
Allow & plan	3		48.6 Task & plan	3		73.0 Questions & answering	6		55.3
Working & makes	7		48.6 Art & take	3		48.6 Informative & solutions	3		41.5
Important & cater	3		48.6 Art & life	3		48.6 Engaging & solutions	3		41.5
Problem & agency	3		48.6 Take & improve	3		48.6 Group & course	12		39.8
Problem & trips	3		48.6 Develop & courage	3		48.6 Activities & answering	6		48.6
Problem & take	3		48.6 Develop & solutions	3		48.6 Questions & activities	6		33.2
Problem & having	3		48.6 Art & imagination	3		36.5 Videos & solutions	3		31.1
Techniques & take	3		48.6 Imagination & improve	3		36.5 Informative & level	3		27.7
Techniques & having	3		48.6 Example & unique	10		35.0 Informative & subject	3		27.7
Knowledge & courage	3		36.5 Original & level	3		32.4 Engaging & level	3		27.7
Knowledge & makes	3		36.5 Original & develop	3		32.4 Engaging & subject	3		27.7
Knowledge & changes	3		36.5 Original & take	3		32.4 Group & solutions	3		24.9

the classroom. Students share the idea that group projects along with presentations are one method of increasing exposure to additional perspectives. The description of engaging students embodies the involvement of various teaching modalities that keep classroom learning dynamic. Specifically, incorporating a variety of teaching methods is also described as catering to multiple learning styles as illustrated by this student:

I think it's always important, whether working with staff or clients, to use a variety of teaching methods to cater to different learning styles and to keep things fresh and engaging. I do this in my current practice and this is a reminder to continue doing so, and to also be on the lookout for fresh ideas in engaging groups. For example, an open assignment about any topic that relates to the class. An assignment like that would bring in unique ideas from each student that may enhance the other students' understanding and might even give the professor ideas about new ways of presenting and discussing the topic.

Creative activities also provide students with a way to develop their own individual expression. Students suggest that variety is a key component of creativity. Sharing creative ideas either through group work or class presentations is also suggested as an important part of teaching creatively in the classroom.

For an example, have students do a project where they create something that shows who they are, their cultural background, and what they love (draw, paint, collage, a musical mix tape). I feel a lot of people have different ways of being creative and if you let them do something they love rather than write a paper I feel we all (students and teacher) will learn how to enhance our creativity in social work. Another example could be allowing students to develop their own treatment plans to get a better sense of each individual's approach to issues.

### *Ideas*

Lastly, the theme of *ideas* encompasses concepts such as ideas and ways. Creativity is described as possessing original ideas. Students suggest that sharing these ideas may also equate to taking a risk and becoming vulnerable. The fear of being judged is expressed as part of the risk in verbalizing ideas to others. Another student indicates that ideas of how to bring creativity into the classroom do not always have to be solely the professor's responsibility. For example, an 'open assignment' is suggested as one way of tapping into the creative ideas of students; this would in turn allow them to create their own assignment which may encourage further engagement in the class. A student comments on what is meant by risk taking and creativity:

There is vulnerability in creating a brand new idea or work product. Creativity requires us to stand, with our new ideas, and risk being judged.

Ideas are also viewed as synonymous with creativity. As such, ideas encompass giving the practitioner more freedom because they provide additional resources or ways of addressing a problem. Students suggest that having more ideas helps them to feel more empowered and hopeful that they can successfully assist a client/patient. One student comments on the importance of creativity and generating ideas:

With more ways to think about something, it'll allow a practitioner to pull from many different ideas/applications for problem solving. I think being able to have a large arsenal of items in your toolbox can benefit the people that you are trying to help. If you get stuck with only using one model while helping people you can miss out on other intervention methods that might work better.

## Discussion

Helping students become more engaged in the classroom and take the information they acquired and connect with it on a personal level assists with student retention (Eadie & Lymbery, 2007). Further, the ability to connect with information and draw it into previous knowledge also allows students to take newly acquired knowledge and apply it to different settings. There is great variability in how learners envision creativity, therefore open-ended questions allow social work students to identify how they define creativity, to discuss ways in which to bring creativeness into the classroom, and to provide means by which they believe that creativity can assist them as practitioners.

Based on their unguided comments, students apparently view creativity as a necessary and vital part of learning. As such, they desire more spontaneity in the classroom in order to foster their creativity; if the traditional class structure including lectures and question and answer sessions continues to be the norm, creative expression will be stifled. Students suggest that being able to exercise autonomy and complete assignments that are not typical in nature (e.g. writing a paper) would provide opportunities for creative self-expression. For example, they recommend an 'open assignment' because it would encourage them to be creative while designing it. An additional creative component would be to also require the student to outline or create a rubric of how they would be graded for this assignment.

Students express the fact that creativity in the classroom involves making interpersonal and emotional connections. One way to provide this opportunity would be to incorporate an assignment wherein the student would augment simply gathering research articles for a paper with actually interviewing a key person from the community who could provide actual insights into their chosen topic area. For example, students taking a class on aging could be asked to interview an older individual above the age of 65 and describe the aging process. This could present the student with an opportunity to engage another individual and personalize the information by introspectively relating the content of the interview to their own aging process. The interview may grant insights into ways they can enhance their own aging process and increase their own quality of life as they age.

Students also agree that creativity in the classroom can have benefits for them when practicing social work. Due to the varying needs of potential clients/patients, flexibility and an understanding that there will not be a one-size-fits-all solution to problem solving is critical. Students mention that increasing and developing their creative skills would therefore benefit them in assisting clients with unique needs. One exercise

which would provide creative endeavors and address this need for students would be the assignment of group projects. In particular, group projects would allow students to make interpersonal connections. Projects that provide students with opportunities to interact with each other would expose them to different perspectives and open their minds. In this way, they would become more flexible and adaptable; these are individual characteristics which are desirable in social work practitioners, particularly when they are working with clients who have individual needs (Beghetto, 2010).

Thus, creative projects can have long lasting effects that are not just experienced on an individual basis but also throughout a community. An additional method of granting students opportunities to enhance creativity on a macro level would be to require them to select an organization that they would like to assist in some way that is related to the specific course topic. Such a project could perhaps involve them helping a social service agency to identify creative ways in which they can provide services to minorities or streamline redundant paperwork. Both of these examples would allow for creativity and give students an opportunity to leave a legacy long after the class has ended. This type of creative process has been shown to assist students in personalizing classroom knowledge and applying it outside the classroom and in the surrounding community (Martin & Pyles, 2013).

Lastly, as one of the students notes, the creative process in the classroom sometimes involves taking a risk to think outside the box, and/or to be different. We as educators need to question our involvement in this way. Are we encouraging students to take leaps of faith and providing a safe environment wherein students can take such risks? Quite possibly, many educators may need to unlearn certain redundant methods of teaching that prescribe to having the teacher solely orchestrate the class; instead, they must allow students to partake in the construction of classroom activities in order to foster more creative learning (Beghetto, 2010).

This study has several limitations. Firstly, the sample is only limited to a small group of social work students taking an organizational behavioral and theory class. The viewpoints of students in other social work classes dealing with other topics (e.g. practice, aging, theory, and policy) may provide additional perspectives. In addition, students from backgrounds other than social work would further provide a more comprehensive view of creativity in the classroom. Student responses were only collected in the United States which further limits generalizability. Lastly, including comparisons between undergraduate and graduate students could also yield a deeper perspective.

The five emergent themes presented here provide an understanding of the importance of creativity in the classroom and in practice. The results indicate the importance of future research to expand on ways to incorporate creativeness in the classroom and across the curriculum (Burgess, 2004). It would be beneficial for future research to examine the influence that thinking, and learning have on creativity. Learning is often achieved through the assimilation of experience (Kolb, 1984). Examination of how the process of learning for each individual translates into creativity could assist in providing more opportunities in the classroom for creative expression. Additional research on personality characteristics and how these may

influence the expression and level of student creativity would also be beneficial. For example, individuals with a need for emotional connections and those who are open minded tend to display a high level of creativity (Lee & Kemple, 2014). Deciphering what motivates students to be creative and the professor's role in this process also requires further exploration (Krishen, 2013). Likewise, obtaining the perspectives of professors on appropriate methods they utilize to infuse creativity in the classroom and what challenges or barriers may exist could also provide vital pedagogical insights. If there are challenges for professors in terms of infusing creativity, what suggestions can they provide for altering or augmenting the curriculum which would allow for additional mutually beneficial creative opportunities? An ongoing pedagogical challenge will be fitting creativity into a grading rubric which is already full of subject knowledge. Thus, perspectives and ideas that professors can provide on ways to evaluate a student's creativity could be invaluable and may call for a re-evaluation of the design of grading rubrics. Finally, it is also important when conducting future research on creativity that researchers be aware that creative expression may vary depending on the subject matter of the class and from which country the data are collected; this leaves comparisons across different disciplines a challenge at best.

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