

By providing the tools to reach a person's underlying spirit, or essence, Bill Rossi's approach enables teachers to bring forth aspects of students' being that truly humanize them. This volume is well worth reading.

— Wander de C. Braga, Ph.D., Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist

Venturing Together

Empowering Students to Succeed

WILLIAM
ROSSI

BOOK ONE

Fanning an Inner Flame:
A Case for the Effectiveness
of the Creative Arts in
Human Services and Education

BOOK TWO

Enlivening the Creative Spirit:
A Strengths-based Educational
and Mentoring Approach
Using the Creative Arts

Introduction

This book offers specific instructional approaches, orientations, and tools that can be used in various settings by teachers, parents, social workers—anyone, in fact, who works with others to help better their lives. It also provides an effective response to the challenging educational, at-risk, and mental health conditions so prevalent today, as described in Book One, *Fanning an Inner Flame*.

Educational reform has been the hue and cry of some of our country's best minds and most caring citizens for a very long time. It has received vast sums of money and produced many experiments and methods, but relatively little progress has been made. As we detail in *Fanning an Inner Flame*, we contend that current initiatives such as accountability and higher educational/testing standards are having limited success because they inadequately address the whole person and often neglect components that are crucial to providing effective education such as considerations of natural ways of learning and alternative learning styles, ensuring a relevant emotional experience, and inculcating humanistic values.

As our culture is increasingly driven by materialism and we as a society grow ever more discontent, our youth are becoming further at risk and in danger of becoming at-risk adults. The present social milieu of our schools isn't the cause of this but simply a symptom, and won't be mitigated until the underlying condition is better understood and addressed. We can begin to alter it, however, by recognizing that this societal orientation is adversely affecting many, and we could address it through the educational system by introducing an inclusive, more natural strengths-based culture that will not only

benefit those within the educational and human services systems but also extend into the community as well.

To find a balance, we can begin to shift from the current focus on individual gain towards one of individual realization that will lead to inclusiveness through understanding and appreciating others. An educational process can provide a way to growth and happiness by creating a culture where students develop the ability to be who they are and to empathize with others. A strengths-based culture that gives students the confidence to seek and have fulfilling experiences based on inquiry, authentic thinking/being, generosity, and non-self centeredness can be an effective approach here.

In recent years, some schools and teachers across the country have begun to actively work towards this goal. By initiating approaches that promote healthy character development and humanization, these teachers and school administrators are contributing to reform. We hope that our work will support and augment their work, inform others, and contribute to influencing the greater educational and social service systems. We need many more teachers and administrators if we are to form the critical mass necessary to provide examples that communicate to others, both within and without the educational community.

Learning should be fun, for the most part, and will be if it's allowed to be natural. When students enjoy learning and are allowed more autonomy, they become more stimulated and successful. Success can be powerful. It has the capacity to liberate, and enables students to understand the responsibilities and principles of learning, to understand the ways and means that got them there. Learning in this way they form good habits, and self-direction comes about quite naturally. Students become independent thinkers and learners who are able to pursue on their own what is important for them.

My approach combines strengths-based education and mentoring. This involves a process of:

- identifying and assessing students' inherent strengths and talents, all natural tendencies that already exist within them

- drawing out, developing, and applying these strengths through a personally relevant learning process to achieve creative thinking, success, and self-reliance
- developing a positive relationship that evolves so the teacher becomes the student's mentor, the student assumes an important role of teaching the mentor, and there is a joint responsibility for growth.

Teaching through mentoring is an educational partnership, a two-way street where the mentor teacher¹ (MT) offers guidance through modeling and leadership rather than staying in the traditional role of the teacher who primarily instructs, tells, and explains. When the MT strives to understand and support his students, continually assessing his relationship to them along with their growth tendencies, he gives them security in their learning. You can achieve real, significant success when you work in this way because it is grounded in some of the basic, fundamental truths of life such as the fact that all people have an innate need to learn who they are and express (give and share) their spirit, which when fulfilled can lead to deep, meaningful relationships with others.

Teaching and learning should engage and stimulate both the students' and teachers' creative spirit, because it's that spirit that invigorates the learning process and inspires us all to take positive risks, go beyond ourselves, and try new ideas. The relationship that develops from this contains basic and subtle truths that give us the opportunity to continually relearn and understand life more deeply. These truths can lead to a peacefulness for which we all search.

By awakening students' natural learning qualities and stimulating their capacity for human values, we give our students the best chance to soar as they go into life. We are really forming a basis from which the creative spirit can continue to develop towards a more humane and spiritual orientation. We can think of this awakening as freeing a process that is already inside them, a process of becoming.

1 The term mentor teacher (MT) is used interchangeably with teacher throughout this book.

By recognizing their spirit and allowing it to unfold, we will be doing our job as educators in the best sense.

Knowledge is to understand, to understand who you are.

If you know not who you are, what's the use of learning?

—Yunus Emre, Turkish Poet

You will find that the more you sincerely pursue this orientation the more it will require from you. It calls for ongoing personal growth, with acceptance of that process and the resulting change. Those who attempt to overlay this approach as a one-size-fits-all method will find that it remains abstract, but those who take this orientation to their work and diligently attempt to apply it will find that it becomes a concrete tool on which they can count; it will give a healthy kind of confidence in working with all kinds of students, and both the MT and student will often have success.

Simply the fact that we are involved in this growth process communicates loud and clear to our students and others around us. This is of value in and of itself. Although it can be uncomfortable at times, personal change is pretty much the only way to have real reform. As the adage goes, we can't change anything without first changing ourselves.

As a teacher you face many challenges as well as high rewards in helping people explore and develop who they are. Every student has a unique history, family situation, and method of learning and communicating, so we often have to modify or even discard standard teaching methods and expectations to really reach each individual. This approach may guide you to new ways of thinking and working and will hopefully contribute to opening areas that will deepen the richness of your teaching experience. I hope that as you consider these perspectives you'll be stimulated to work with them and make them uniquely yours. Teaching should challenge our own creative powers as deeply as it does our students'.

Hopefully you will share your own creative experiences with your peers—www.merge-education.com is available for this if you'd like to join us in conversation. Creativity has a wonderful capacity to bring people together. Working in this way you will feel more

confident about developing new approaches and relationships with students, and you will best stimulate creativity in the students by being creatively involved yourself.

Along with providing an overview of some of the fundamental principles of my approach to teaching, this book can serve as a reference manual with practical examples relevant to your every day work with students. While my discipline is the arts and I typically give artistic examples, the underlying precepts of these principles can serve all disciplines. If the arts are not involved in the way you work with students, I hope that as you read you will consider the extent to which they could serve as a catalyst for any discipline in terms of enhancing the creative process. Einstein's use of music to heighten his creativity to achieve his scientific realizations is just one excellent example of the tremendous value of the arts.

Many of the points and approaches covered in this book are further addressed in the other components of the *Merge System for Creative Education*:

- the manual *Risks Worth Taking: Tools for Creating a Strengths-Based Arts Mentoring Program*
- our curriculum units *Draw on Experience* (Art Mentoring) and *Play by Heart* (Music Mentoring)
- our evaluation software, *SETS: Student Evaluation & Tracking System*.

This approach has evolved and been effectively used over decades of teaching, program design, and implementation, and there are references throughout these writings to my years as a private instructor and as Executive Director of both YATMA (Youth Advancement through Music & Art) and EMTAH (Educational Mentoring through the Arts & Humanities). We are available through www.merge-education.com for consultation and trainings if you would like to delve more deeply.



In *Venturing Together*, Bill Rossi makes a compelling case for his groundbreaking educational approach based in creative strengths-based mentoring. His argument—aimed at educators, human service providers, parents, and the general public alike—is that only a dynamic, positive, and personal approach can ignite students’ creative spirit, the force that drives learning and personal growth. Working from the bottom up, his approach focuses on the students, develops their strengths and talents, and guides them to follow their intrinsic motivation to find their way through life.

Although *Venturing Together* focuses on mentoring through the arts, the principles it expounds can be used in approaching many subjects, and can empower students to develop personal understanding and build good relationships that will ultimately lead to positive community involvement and productive communities.

Mr. Rossi is a 1971 graduate of Boston’s Berklee College of Music and lifelong jazz pianist and educator. He has demonstrated the effectiveness of his approach in programs in Seattle, WA and Albany, NY, and is currently building a center for mentoring through the arts in Chester County, PA.

“Bill Rossi reminds us that young people cannot grow up complete unless art, music and creativity are part of their lives, and demonstrates how to bring out the best in students with specific instructional approaches encouraging mentoring, strength-based teaching, motivation, and putting students first. What he demonstrates is that effective education is . . . about encouraging young people’s innate love of learning.”

— James Harvey, Senior Fellow, Evans School of Public Affairs,
University of Washington; co-author, *A Legacy of Learning*.

“This volume provides valuable, specific tools for anyone wanting to creatively enhance their ability to teach or mentor. This is a very effective approach, and should contribute to educational and social reform.”

— Katherine Gerbino, Ph.D., Assistant District
Superintendent of Instruction, Capital Region BOCES, NY

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