

Around the Block:  
Facilitating Creative Problem Solving for Writers and Painters

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## **Abstract**

Internalized creative block is a frequently discussed topic among writers and painters. While popular culture holds that blocks can have psychological and neurological causes, current literature considers blocks to the creative process a part of the process itself. There is some evidence that outside facilitation of Creative Problem Solving (CPS) is an option that can assist writers and painters who are at an impasse. This paper summarizes literature on the subject and highlights CPS techniques commonly used to overcome creative blocks. The paper concludes with a section on the author's personal reflections.

*Keywords: creative blocks, facilitation, Creative Problem Solving*

## **Around the Block:**

### **Facilitating Creative Problem Solving for Writers and Painters**

To an otherwise productive writer or painter, creative block is the sense that words won't flow or images can't be made (Weiner, 2000). Paradoxically, it has been the topic of many books, from a doctor's best-selling account of her own postpartum-induced inability to write (Flaherty, 2004) to an artist's description of the fear she routinely faces before a blank canvas (Flack, 1986). Although there is a body of literature that pinpoints psychological and neurological causes, other points of view hold that experiencing an internalized creative block is a part of the creative process (McNiff, 1998).

This paper examines the definition of creativity as a process of thinking and decision making, and explores the role a facilitator of Creative Problem Solving (CPS) can play in assisting artists and writers past immobilization toward productive action. The paper concludes with personal observations from the author, who recognizes the principles of CPS facilitation in facets of her own creative work

### **Talk about being stuck**

For people who produce books and art for a living, struggling with a creative block presents a disorienting dilemma. It can be more daunting than the evaporation of the right word or the telling gesture; when the mode of expression that usually proceeds blithely suddenly doesn't work, ego, money, and status can all be at stake. Christopher Simmons (2010), an artist and principal in the San Francisco graphic design firm Mine, delineated the difficulty:

“To me there are three factors that contribute to creative block: One, believing you’re stuck. Two, knowing you’re stuck but not knowing how to get out. And three, knowing you’re stuck and knowing how to get out, but doubting your ability to do it” (Overcoming Creative Block section, para. 39).

While obstacles to creativity may be social, material, or environmental, in popular culture the reason for stalling out is often attributed to potentially painful causes. “Writing has deep psychological roots,” asserted William Zinsser (1994) in his stylebook *On Writing Well*. “The reasons why we express ourselves as we do, or fail to express ourselves because of ‘writer’s block,’ are partly buried in the subconscious mind. There are as many kinds of writer’s block as there are kinds of writers, and I have no intention of trying to untangle them” (pp. 23-24).

Neurologist and writer Alice W. Flaherty (2004) did try to untangle them (with what she admitted were varying degrees of success) in her memoir, *The Midnight Disease: The Drive to Write, Writer’s Block, and the Creative Brain*. Block, she contended, is a kind of pathology for writers and painters, and she examined it through a medical lens. She put forth the biomechanical explanation of a malfunction in the brain’s cortex, explaining that block is “an abnormality of the basic biological drive to communicate.” (p. 2)

In contrast, artist Audrey Flack (1986) defined block with cosmological labels, and described the immobilizing fear of a blank canvas in psychically loaded terms:

You are about to create a world in this pure and empty space, a world in which complex goals have been set. In one way, you have become God; in another way, you know you are not (p. 12).

## Endemic to creation

In these instances, writers and artists likened blocks to a complete shutdown, rather than a temporary stall of the creative process. While it doesn't deny that some artists develop pathological blocks, a contemporary counterpoint has maintained that internalized blocks are inherent in painting and writing alike, and are inescapable. In fact, some authors on the subject have argued that blocks are actually a normal part of creativity.

Creativity can be defined as “the art of treating any kind of obstacle as a challenge to be overcome,” Robert Paul Weiner maintained in *Creativity & Beyond: Cultures, Values, and Change* (2000, p. 234). He held that blocks can be viewed as a problem to be solved, and that such obstacles may actually spur creativity.

“It can be helpful to think of the obstacles as a necessary part of the process rather than hindrances to it,” agreed artist and educator Shaun McNiff (1998, p.75). The point, he contended, is not to fear the block, but to approach it with action.

Yet, because the causes of block vary wildly—from procrastination that masquerades as incubation to preemptively judging work—the path forward can be unclear to a writer or painter at an impasse (Weisberg, 1993). Or, as writing expert Patricia T. O'Connor acknowledged during an interview with internet journalist Claire E. White (1999), creative block can often present itself as a matter of problem finding, rather than problem solving:

Maybe your problem is that you've gotten bogged down in research (perhaps in an unconscious attempt to avoid writing). Or maybe you've run out of material and petered out. Or gone off on the wrong track. Or gotten sidetracked by trivial problems....Finally,

your whole approach might be wrong: You could be writing about the wrong subject, making the wrong case, trying to prove the wrong point. The truth is sometimes hidden in the underbrush (para. 19).

Initially, most writers and painters will try to work cut through that underbrush, the persistent block also known by the psychological term “fixation,” themselves. A common tactic is to take a break to reframe the problem (Dodds & Smith, 1999). Novelist and *New York Times* media columnist David Carr (carr2n, 2010) shared his success with that stratagem on the social networking site Twitter: “Spent 12 hrs at keyboard trying to jam square peg into a round hole. Watched a movie, rebooted and was done in an hour.” (June 26 section, para.1).

Such an approach can obviously meet with success, though not reliably. For persistent creative blocks, a more stringent means to problem solving is required, according to philosopher Robert Boostrom (1996). Yet that is difficult to undertake without assistance. “The process will work only if you think about each idea and try to find fault with it,” he argued. “Unless you ask yourself challenging questions, the answers you come up with are likely to fall short of genuinely solving the problem” (p. 176).

Instead of soldiering on alone to free a block, many successful artists and writers rely on editors, teachers, and coaches, who sometimes (but not always) work with them in professional capacities. At a stalemate, they seek critiques and edits, listen closely to the comments from the editor (or teacher or coach), and incorporate suggested refinements in their works (Sawyer, 2006). In this way, as they help move a writer or artist from inaction to action, editors, teachers, and coaches assume the role of a facilitator to the creative process.

## **What facilitation can accomplish**

As process guides, facilitators are in an ideal position to help writers and artists move through creative blocks. By focusing on process rather than content, facilitators can act as a kind of escort through the maze of creative uncertainty by listening, asking questions, directing process, coaching, and helping establish goal setting and decision making. Most potently, a facilitator's final act actually empowers a client (in this case, a writer or painter) to produce work anew (Puccio, 1999).

At first glance, it might seem counterintuitive that a single approach could benefit both painters and writers; after all, one relies on visual aptitudes, the other on verbal ones. Yet both painting and writing require a host of component skills that are eventually integrated into “an almost automatic set of strategies used in meaningful, logical, verbal, sequential, analytic thinking” (Edwards, 1987, p. 130).

Blocks occur, Edwards asserted, “because the components of any global skill, once learned, become so melded and integrated that they almost seem to disappear into each other” (1987, p. 130). In other words, both painters and writers who are otherwise proficient at their pursuits can lose sight of the separate skills required to produce new work. The creative process can no longer be rationally viewed by the artist at a conscious level, and the stage is set for a creative block when a stall arises.

Possessing both a fresh point of view and a clear understanding of the parts of the process, a trained facilitator can assist in illuminating the problem, helping enumerate solutions, and helping the client see a way forward to producing again (Mayer, 1999).

## Clarifying matters with Creative Problem Solving

A facilitator has many tools to choose from when it comes to helping loosen a creative block. Creative Problem Solving (CPS), first developed in the 1940s, is a longstanding, long-studied method for solving problems. With its characteristic convergent and divergent phases, CPS balances the generation of many options against the evaluation of those options (Puccio, Murdock, & Mance, 2007).

Because of its reliance on facilitation, CPS is a logical model for breaking creative block (Parnes, 1999). As Parnes stated:

In applying the steps of CPS, what you are really trying to do is proceed from examining “what is” to exploring “what might be,” to judging “what ought to be,” to assessing “what can presently be,” to deciding “what I will commit to do now,” to action that becomes a new “what is” (p. 469).

Such forward movement—acknowledging the problem and helping the writer or painter as client understand how to view the block as his or her own—is the stock in trade of a facilitator (Rees, 1991). Using open-ended questions, the facilitator helps the client identify the problem, and then guides the client through the clarification, transformation, and implementation phases of the Thinking Skills Model to move them toward resolution (Puccio et al, 2007).

By assisting the client in diverging and then converging through every phase of the process, the facilitator points out to the client that the person has named the block, has come up with ideas

around it, and can proceed with a solution. Afterward, in evaluating the solution, the facilitator keeps the client on track in working through the resolution (Rees, 1991).

### **Leading by CPS example**

There is evidence a CPS-based model can successfully break a creative block. Writing in the journal *Leonardo*, English management researcher and author A.D. Jankowicz (1987) detailed two examples of facilitating artists through creative blocks using a model of thinking and decision-making established on the CPS hallmarks of divergent and convergent thinking. For both artists, he built a matrix of media (“found object,” “acrylic on canvas,” “watercolor,” etc.) and constructs (“familiar/easier,” “inhibited/nervous,” etc.) (p. 42). He then asked the painters to imagine new elements (that is, ones not on their existing lists of media) which would apply to new projects. By producing a broad range of possible options, and then selecting the most likely alternatives, both painters distinguished new directions for their work. “I am getting the feeling again, to get back to the studio,” one told him after their session (p. 44).

The reason each matrix exercise was effective, Jankowicz maintained, is that “it makes relationships explicit, and inferences, conclusions, and future intentions more readily available” (p. 43).

Similar methods have proven to be useful for breaking through writer’s block as well. Reporting results from a study in the *Journal of Reading*, educator Lawrence T. Oliver Jr. (1982) acknowledged that there are “no universal prescriptions for good writing,” yet rigorous divergent and convergent questioning by a teacher/facilitator can help pave the way past block, now and in the future.

“Students who find systematic questioning to be a fruitful device for stimulating thinking should be

encouraged to employ the procedure on their own...whenever they experience blocking,” he suggested (p. 166).

### **On personal reflection**

When I chose this topic for a literature review, I couldn't say that I have ever really experienced writer's block during my 30-year career as a journalist. However, as an editor, I have had extensive experience helping other writers overcome hurdles that kept them from fulfilling assignments.

When I was new to supervising writers, my initial reaction was to try to solve their problems for them and move to the next step in the editing process. But that approach ultimately failed. Only when I adopted the facilitator's mantle of owning the process, not the content, could I help my associates overcome their creative blocks in the long run. In time, I instinctively used some of the questioning tools of CPS to assist my colleagues in accessing both problems and solutions on their own terms. They then possessed the means themselves to short-circuit similar stalemates in the future.

In the course of researching this paper, understanding the common ground between writing and painting has helped me understand how my experience writing and editing has had demonstrable bearing on my development as a painter.

For the last three years, I have been a painting student of artist and memoirist Dori DeCamillis (2009). Because she both writes and paints, we share a point of view when she assists me as facilitator in much the same way I have worked with writers. She helps me observe a problem, and then guides me to devise options for solving it myself. With her instruction in the commission of a painting, I formulate and incorporate my own suggestions to further articulate my work. I have

found the method especially useful when I have been working in unfamiliar media and have been trying to decide how to complete a piece. With this insight, I believe I can use the method in assisting both the writers and painters I work with.

In my paintings, facilitation has moved me past uncertainty to a point where I am ready to finish what my imagination has begun, as another of my teachers, Betty Edwards (1986), put it. The knowledge in perceptual skills I have accrued with the help of a facilitator has informed my work, and will continue to. That knowledge is, Edwards has said, “one of the roads that lead to the goal of greater creativity” (p. 230).

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