Building social emotional communities through animation: 
Connecting ideas and creative people.

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ABSTRACT

We live in a visual culture with more devices than ever to “keep in touch” but becoming more isolated and feeling disconnected from each other, due to distractions, stress, and basically a lack of focus and poor emotional self-management. This can affect our work and vice versa; relationships, connectedness are crucial when we need to work in team. The interaction with each other enriches our work experiences as well as help us to keep our emotional balance for optimal decision making. Scientists and teachers can be entrepreneurs: Dan Siegel, Linda Lantieri or Richard Davidson, are applying the use of mindfulness in schools and giving seminars for professionals in different areas, as they study the benefits of nourishing compassion and well-being in their labs. The Animated Learning LAB ¹ takes these studies into account, via the emotional intelligence of Daniel Goleman, to integrate them into our research of animation and visual literacy, producing creative environments and focusing on the optimal development of students. We enhance values such as tolerance, empathy and learning by playing. Currently this results easier to do thanks to the improvement of digital devices such as tablets, smart phones, portable cameras which are very present in our daily lives, giving us the chance to experiment the creation of audiovisual productions, especially thanks to the emerging pop culture of apps and games. Based on the results of our practice, using animation and visual literacy, we want to show how animation is useful to build social emotional environments at many levels (schools, companies), where students can freely explore new possibilities to continue innovating in life, not just at work but also in our homes. The Animation Workshop teaching and working philosophy has been a good way to cultivate emerging ideas and build creative emotional environments in classrooms, and the emerging incubation nest of novel studios, such as the Arsenal ². Animation can be used to teach entrepreneurs a better way to connect with their employees, to become more creative and enhance communication, and thus productivity. In schools, where animation is not the main subject of study, it can still be used for the same purposes; it can be applied to make classes more dynamic and interesting, incorporating current devices and digital platforms of great interest to students, in order to catch their attention, which nowadays is a big challenge for many educators. Animation connects ideas and people in schools and reaches companies looking for innovation and new ways of thinking and feeling.

INTRODUCTION

Animation is commonly understood as children’s media or mistaken as a “genre”, which focuses mainly on children. Truthfully, beyond that narrow mind set of thoughts, animation is a serious business in which the largest audience might be children, but it is also an adult world, and is not restricted to film industry productions. It extends to medical, scientific and military use, among other emerging disciplines. In times of crisis or extreme situations, as we have been recently experiencing, companies, entrepreneurs, scholars and others start to look for the bright solution, a light at the end of the tunnel, a genius mind, the formula which will rescue us and tell us how to resolve our problems. We become more creative than ever in the face of change, when we are pushed to the limit, almost desperate; when change has always been the constant factor. It’s about time to change the old paradigms of teaching and focus on learning, and how to teach in order to become more resilient and cooperative on a daily basis before we find ourselves at our wit’s end.

To make this possible and accessible to everybody, we propose animation as an emotional media to teach and/or incorporate visual literacy in schools/companies as we learn language and writing, among other subjects.
Animation offers a medium of storytelling and visual entertainment which can bring pleasure and information to people of all ages everywhere in the world. Quoted in "COSI exhibit explores world of cartoons" by Jeffrey Zupanic in The Review (2007).

It is true that we may find some resistance to teach through new media as animation from more traditional schools or people who have difficulties engaging with new forms of learning, but we must try and fail, until we find a way to enhance communication in spite of social, economic and political difficulties.

Experts from the neurosciences and educational fields, such as Richard Davidson (Winsconsin University), Daniel Goleman (Emotional Intelligence) or Dan Siegel (Mindfulness Institute-US), have demonstrated in their studies how effective a positive and relax attitude improve learning, attention and even rewiring our brain for a better self. By bringing to consciousness patterns which we can work on, in order to align beliefs with feelings and actions, we can help students no matter their age, cultural background or gender, not only to feel better but get better within themselves; consciousness can be understood as:

Consciousness is a state of mind in which there is knowledge of one’s own existence and of the existence of surroundings. Consciousness is a state of mind -- if there is no mind there is no consciousness; consciousness is a particular state of mind, enriched by a sense of the particular organism in which a mind is operating; and the state of mind includes knowledge to the effect that the said existence is situated, that there are objects and events surrounding it. Consciousness is a state of mind with a self process added to it. Antonio Damasio (2010, p.157)

Before addressing how animation makes this possible, we structure the article into the following parts: 1. Definitions of creativity, animation and connectivity (Oxford Dictionaries, California State University, Northridge) to set up a common ground within a more social pedagogical context rather than simply artistic, and see how they can relate to each other. We continue with Section 2. Teaching Methods through making and watching animation movies; Section 3. Results & Conclusions, based on our experiences, working in different schools and professional studios. In section 4, Open Discussion, we question future research into animation use in education and entrepreneurial arenas.

In order to create a coherent animation which communicates some understanding learnt from a particular subject, the student or atelier has to firstly cognitively construct a level of comprehension in relation to the subject or theme. (Sperling, Seyedmonir. Alekic, and Meadowa, 2003).

Animation is a visual, thinking media that offers an enjoyable new way of learning and teaching by playing, and emotional intelligence in any curricular subject, by connecting ideas and feelings which build creative communities, through movies, video games, graphic novels, comics, illustrations as well as other hybrid formats.

1.1 The relationship between animation, creativity and connectivity

Robert E. Franken (1993, p.396) defined creativity as “the tendency to generate or recognise ideas, alternatives, or possibilities that may be useful in solving problems, communicating with others, and entertaining ourselves and others”; from Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2009, p.28) creativity “is any act, idea, or product that changes an existing domain, or that transforms an existing domain into a new one...What counts is whether the novelty he or she produces is accepted for inclusion in the domain.”. Such definitions together with the idea of connectivity, provided by Cambridge (2016), as the ability of a computer or system to connect with another or several; we propose a description of animation beyond technicalities and its most traditional concept of the illusion of life. Animation is a media that connect people through visual storytelling working their creativity during the creative process; animation is emotional energy in motion, the artistic expression of an internal reflection (individual or collective).

Through animation we can learn to communicate not just our own feelings and ideas, but get to know each other, becoming more connected. Creativity and connectedness increase by sharing knowledge during the working process, at the same time as we create a productive space for discussions, which is difficult to find in companies where people are normally tense, and afraid to talk or suggest ideas. We connect through emotions and things that we like or dislike, creating social groups based on very different themes. We have seen TV series or comics, throughout history, in which audiences become true communities and cultural phenomenon, Sailor Moon (1992) , He Man (1983), Pokémon (1995), Transformers (1984), and Harry Potter (2001) all contribute to our identity, they connect us. We learn from, and make
films which make us who we are. Everything starts with creativity and learning during the process.

Daniel Goleman (2015), clearly highlighted, at The Executive Edge: An Insider’s Guide to Outstanding Leadership the difference between creativity and innovation, and the commonly misunderstood connection between business and creativity: “Business people tend to think of what they do as being very organized and strategic. Of course it should be, but businesses cannot succeed, especially under modern competitive conditions, without innovation. And innovation depends on creativity. Creativity is the front end of a process that ideally will result in innovation.”

1.2 Using creativity in productions

Creativity is not just associated with the arts, it’s an attitude/process than can be learnt, trained and practiced through animation, where success resides in its potential and diversity during production, as noted by Goleman. When we work on visual productions for publishers or companies, we show them that there are many activities in animation, such as drawing, thinking, writing, the use of music, visual effects and so on, With which we can explore endless possibilities and approaches to different means of problem solving within a work team; cooperating, experimenting with democracy, articulating what words sometimes can’t do as the body expresses what the mind on occasions shouts about; building new worlds as “game/play”, where we all may enter in the “flow” as Csikszentmihalyi (1996) describes as “the feeling when things were going well as an almost automatic, effortless, yet highly focused state of consciousness”.

Capturing the moments that make life worth living is a good definition of creativity. The passion or ecstasy that all scientists or artists reveal to Csikszentmihalyi in their interviews, by doing what they love in the “way” that they decide, seems to be the core and common seed of what makes what they do creative, with the reward of feeling fulfilled. They find the joy to play again as children, without pressure, where freedom become the biggest asset to dreaming and expanding our minds, rediscovering novelty and continuing to reinvent ourselves as our environments, from inside to outside, growing together. The “how” is what matters in order to find the way to be creative in doing what you do, similar to finding our personal voice and uniqueness. What makes us unique is how we do things and the arts play a big role in this discovery. Sir Ken Robinson (2008) stated that “The arts especially address the idea of aesthetic experience. And aesthetic experience is one in which your senses are operating at their peak, when you’re present in the current moment, when you’re resonating with the excitement of this thing that you’re experiencing, when you’re fully alive”.

In the TED talk “Do schools kill creativity?” Sir Ken Robinson (2006) questions the way that creativity has been virtually removed from the current system of scholars, since we still follow the same rules that were established in the XIX century. Robinson emphasises the problem of fearing failure or being stigmatised when one is wrong. But, as he says, if you’re not prepared to be wrong you can never come up with something original. As children we don’t mind trying, we’re more creative because we enjoy freedom, as we grow up we learn that mistakes are the worst things that we can do, so we find ourselves more afraid and constrained as we become adults. As Robinson suggests in his talks, we need to change the teaching paradigms in schools and thus the way some companies are run as replicas of these schools but on a higher level, where we may still be bullied, and face dramas and challenges, either personally or professionally.

A good start is finding new ways to learn to be a person who is confident, creative and competent in life, as we continue to learn subjects such as maths or literature. Animation, as an artistic media and language, covers a great deal, since we are surrounded by visuals most of the time, and games, interactive books or even making animation clips can be excellent tools which nowadays are in the palm of our hands. Animation succeeds for its magic to dream about the impossible and play with our imagination; we may be visionaries of the future. David H. Lyam (2000), an American writer, researched for over 40 years the factors that better describe creative people. From his essay on what characteristics lead to greater creativity, he pointed out that “Creative people may appear absent minded, or single-minded, out of touch with reality, and perhaps they are. They may already live in the future, a future the rest of the world will discover late.”

The future or present continuum, as I like to call it, is possible and will be possible, as long as we educate people, from schools to big corporations, to dream fearlessly, freely and try their ideas as many times as it’s needed, thus, helping them understand that failing is just part of the creative process.

I have not failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work. Thomas Edison (n.d.)
2. Teaching methods

In this section we expose some working and teaching methods which we use to develop creativity and new approaches to communicate, taking into account the role of playing in learning processes.

2.1 Learning by playing

Playing is very alike to experience animation, it is related to the natural way which our brain acquires information through different learning processes. Psychologists such as the Russian Vygotsky (1934) emphasized the importance and influence of the environment and social interactions in the learning processes and cognitive development in children; contrary to Jean Piaget’s theory (1936) where the development of the child must occur before the learning. We want to mention both for their contributions to but primarily point out the observations that we share with Vygotsky, in our animation classes (theory) and in the creative processes (practice). In Scandinavia there are a big number of schools called free schools which apply most of the main statements of Vygotsky’s Social development Theory since teachers are more a guide to children who play an active role in the classes, in this way there is a circle where the learning happens in both directions, the teacher learns as well as his or her pupils do. It is a game where students are more motivated as they have a louder voice to participate in the assignments with the help of the tutor, who no longer is the frightening figure in the classroom. This could be translated into the work life in an office with a boss and their employees. In animation you can experience the shift of roles through acting or by using characters which will express your ideas and feelings without feeling judged through metaphors.

The creation of a story, characters and scenarios provide the ateliers with a metaphor which they can use to learn, by first hand, how other peers think and feel, depending on their upbringing or believes. Vygotsky said that "learning is a necessary and universal aspect of the process of developing culturally organized, specifically human psychological function" (1978, p. 90); reason why we consider working in groups an essential exercise to improve communication skills and social relationships. We need to experience empathy and see with other’s eyes as we are shaped by different environments. This is a new way of teaching that we would like to see being used in many schools and companies in a near future as Daniel Goleman (2014) appreciates “there is an active school movement in character education and teaching ethics. But I don’t think it’s enough to have children just learn about ethical virtuosity, because we need to embody our ethical beliefs by acting on them. This begins with empathy.”

At the Animated Learning LAB we use animation as a potential set of techniques to enhance creativity and connectivity, among other human values. The methodology is as follows: first, learn to observe; second, understand what we see and how this information affects us, including our body and brains; and third, learn a way to express that reflection. We give workshops and develop curriculums to teach students, teachers and eager learners to develop a critical open mind set in order to communicate better, by emphasizing freedom, creativity and playfulness to experiment and work attitudes such as compassion, tolerance and understanding. We put it in practice working in small groups producing a little animated film with a common goal which we choose together. Differing techniques or aesthetic aspects of the final product, we focus on the process of creation from a relax status of body-mind where empathy increases, and respect are present. Animation engages body (sensations) and mind (belief system), bringing the unconscious to consciousness in a big playground where you can experiment with the impossible, thinking “out of the box”. This attitude is what we need to be creative and innovative.

2.2 Watching and making animation films

The results of watching movies, neurocinematics¹, “the ability to measure the effect of films on viewers’ brains with high spatial and temporal precisions can provide a new analytical paradigm for assessing and analyzing different aspects of films, film genres, and cinematic styles” (Hasson; Hendler 2008, p.14), Uri Hasson and Talma Hendler are two of many emerging scientists interested in the science of films, we take their work into our research and teaching to support how visual literacy is so relevant not just to be able to read images in movement but on the production of films, video games, etc., in terms how by this simple action can increase our sense of empathy and teach us about our emotions to understand
ourselves and other individuals. Our brains synchronize when we hear a story; we feel what the speaker is telling us. When watching movies or playing games, we share an experience, a sense of community is felt as indeed happens with the most famous video games, such as World Craft or Candy Craft, which have created strong communities where people meet not just to play but to be social, they want to connect and feel part of a group.

Before starting the creative process to make an animated movie, we watch visual samples, such as short films, commercials or similar, for discussion and analysis. Formal aspects are reviewed, including how they were made, which emotions were involved, the message, and the target group, so we can start a discussion based on a theme that we previously chose (it could be something related to a school subject or a communication issue at work). By sharing our thoughts in groups, the ateliers learn on one hand, the ingredients that they need to produce a film, and on the other, which aspects they must consider before delivering a product. Skills such as speaking and defending positions are applied, as is learning to listen and respect other people’s opinions. What matters is the creative, learning process, because the quality of the results varies depending on the backgrounds and attitudes of the students, and so the goal previously set up at the beginning of the workshop or class. This process has been effective since Greek tragedy was created, such as Aristotle’s storytelling framework, and is currently used to make classical narratives. By making a movie, the student is an active protagonist in the story, embodying all experiences from different perspectives and play roles, questioning personal affairs and facing challenges.

Tragedy is essentially an imitation not of persons but of action and life, of happiness and misery. All human happiness or misery takes the form of action; the end for which we live is a certain kind of activity, not a quality. Character gives us qualities, but it is in our actions--what we do--that we are happy or the reverse--a tragedy is impossible without action, but there may be one without Character. Aristotle’s Poetics, 347-342 B.C.

Giving seminars or workshops to entrepreneurs, and teachers, not just those related to animation schools or entertaining businesses, helps to create a relaxing ground on which to play different roles, and increase and improve communication as we work in small groups, experiencing the magic of producing a short film. We teach through visual literacy and animation how to express and communicate more effectively, this includes how to speak and move when a speech, orders, directions or a class must be given. Accepting criticism is necessary, since resilience is one of our targets when teaching and working with animation.

3.1 RESULTS

In this section we include the results from our teaching experiences as mentors and active creators (animators, visual communicators) following the methods previously mentioned, and also the observations of some directors in the film industry who use playfulness, the practice of resilience and being flexible in their meetings when they give instructions to work, similar to our teaching philosophy, which we try to link as much as possible to real industry.

- Communication increases between team members due to the freedom given by teachers, mentors or supervisors.
- Subjects learn to be more confident about speaking their minds and giving their opinions, and they appreciate the importance of providing space to listen to others.
- There is a richer and major exchange of knowledge during productions or activities in teams (games).
- Subjects appreciate the relevance of enjoying their work in order to be more relaxed and increase creativity.
• Enhancement in understanding the power of trying and failing, supporting each other with constructive critiques for future improvements.
• Feelings of satisfaction, and security after trying new tasks or leaving a comfort zone, despite the quality of results.
• Basic knowledge about perception and visual communication with an emerging critical attitude to question visual information.
• Basics of animation techniques and filmmaking language (storytelling).
• The ateliers feel more confident within themselves with a deeper understanding of the subject they work on.

As do many other creative business minds, Kathy Alitieri (2012), a production designer from Dreamworks, knows the importance of giving people the security to feel safe and encourage them to be their best selves and grow: “I’d much rather have someone reach and fail and reach again and fail again than just have someone follow what I think is right. They usually don’t fail. They figure it out and they grow.”

The current president of Pixar Animation Studios and Walt Disney Animation Studios said “if you give a good idea to a mediocre team, they’ll screw it up. But if you give a mediocre idea to a great team, they’ll make it work (Edwin Catmull, 2012). He is very aware of the importance of failing, learn from mistakes, take risks, providing constructive critiques in their famous “daily meetings”, creating a supportive safe environment where employees trust and respect each other, what at Pixar they refer as brain trust. No place to egos, creativity is a group task. A diverse group of different talents where everybody equally has a voice to speak up to discuss and expose issues. As a result you get a true sense of community which shares ideas.

3.2. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Our point with this paper is to show that such a compendium of strategies happening within the animation industry (daily meetings, constructing emotional environments of trust, applying playfulness) and understanding that making animation can trigger those same strategies, can be applied to any field of specialty. In the end we’re talking about a productive business: to work, create and know how to direct, encourage people not just to do their jobs, but to be passionate about it so they can go beyond barriers to discover new things, coping with changes and challenges. The formula is simple, although not easy to put in practice: happier people, more efficient business; everything depends on how the connections are made.

• Creativity is an attitude-process group task for arts, sciences and technology interlacing together.
• Every day Animation influences more our lifes through movies and games, so our brains and way of thinking; we learn from stories and by playing.
• Working with animation can help us to rewire our brain into our best self as long as we have the curiosity and desire, then, only then, it’s the “right timing” to take action and become creative by connecting with others, whatever your fieldwork or background might be.
• Animation can be a tool to learn social skills and the emotional world, important for decision making.
• It is an alternative language to communicate and create new creative mind sets due to the use of affective-cognitive neurosciences.

Since there is an increasing interest from professionals of the educational and entrepreneurial world researching new incoming approaches of teaching and learning, it’s time to explore them and interconnect more the entrepreneurial area with the academia. Either if you come from sciences or an artistic background, it is necessary a deeper understanding of the emotional world, and what we believe, it is the key to build social emotional communities. We should look for more interaction between different fields to focus in the wholeness and get out of our comfort zones. Animation offers an unlimited world of possibilities in sciences and education.
It is starting to be used in medicine and virtual simulation of surgeries, architecture, and training for pilots for example. It is important to keep developing platforms, blogs, conferences... to exchange knowledge and share not just the improvements of technology but the results obtained from different areas and angles which include the use of animation. We should pay more attention on the current demands for schools and companies to be practical and efficient if we want to be productive and enjoy what we do with, why not, a vision to be the ones who might innovate and be creative in our area of expertise, to get the best of our jobs as we experience a nice time. We can inspire others as many people and sources have previously done it for us. It’s vital to improve the way we communicate our ideas and feelings, by means, being less judgmental and be more tolerant. That’s the magic of animation, make you feel fully alive and see anything is possible from different perspectives.

NOTES

1 Animated Learning LAB is an independent department of The Animation Workshop (Denmark) which works with animation as a learning tool.

2 Arsenale is a cluster of independent creative businesses inhabiting the old military base in Viborg, Denmark. http://www.arsenalet.dk/


FIGURES

Fig.1. Film stripe. Hanne Pedersen.

Fig.2. Cut Out Characters. Animated Learning LAB. http://www.animwork.dk/TWA/

Fig.3. Animated Learning LAB logo. http://www.animwork.dk/TWA/

Fig.4. Classroom of Animated Learning and Animation, VIA University College

Fig.5. Classroom of Creative Learning and Animation, VIA University College

Fig.6. Building 105, The Animation Workshop. Viborg. Denmark

BIBLIOGRAPHY


