

Creativity in the cause of service

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Abstract

This article chronicles the creative life of Ken McCluskey, the Dean of Education at the University of Winnipeg in Manitoba, Canada. He looks beyond the ivory tower and, indeed, reshapes the tower. Fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration are evident throughout the life and work of Dean McCluskey. He creates an innovative environment and uses humor in all aspects of his life. McCluskey recognizes the importance of “idea time” and guards against “group think.” His creative life can be described as a spirit of service, engaged in leveling the playing field for unengaged students and marginalized children. His work with aboriginal peoples is highlighted. For McCluskey, success will be measured in the quality of the society left behind for our grandchildren. He models a life lived through creativity.

Keywords

Creativity, leadership, equity, innovation, humour

Dean or homeless person?

The current Dean of Education at the University of Winnipeg looks nothing like the typical educational administrator. It simply does not seem possible that he could be the high-powered, internationally influential academic described in the university press releases. With his long, often unkempt hair, his faded blue jeans and Mickey Mouse sweatshirts, and his Goofy wrist watch (which tells the time in reverse), he stands out in a world of tweed jackets and well-ironed neckties. His refusal to conform to accepted standards of dress sometimes has interesting results. For example, new security guards on the inner-city campus have been known to mistake Dr McCluskey, Dean of

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Education, for a vagrant. There are several stories of guards who have followed him around to make sure he would not cause trouble as he roamed about the institution. If I said that this has happened more than once a term, it wouldn't be hyperbole.

McCluskey refuses to play ball. In fact, his style of pushing back on established rules extends far beyond fashion, and includes everything from institutional norms and traditional academic roles and assumptions, to widely accepted educational practices that he actively encourages his faculty and students to challenge.

The early years

McCluskey describes himself as “an only child, except for my sister,” and his childhood and adolescence as being “totally happy” (Personal Communication, 14 December 2012). His talents, athletic as well as academic, surfaced quickly. He entered school early, and in grade five was placed in a “major work” classroom for gifted students. In high school and university he excelled at sports, particularly hockey. Obviously, McCluskey received plenty of positive attention from the get-go, but he credits his parents for keeping him grounded, instilling solid values, and modeling the importance of service (Cress et al., 2005; Greenleaf et al., 2002). In his words:

To a large extent, of course, we are all products of our early environmental experiences. An old psychology professor of mine once told the class, “The most important choice you can make in life is who your parents are.” I chose wisely. . . . [I] grew up in an incredibly happy home – a home with good tone. Over time, I had the opportunity to observe my parents in “administrative” roles at their respective jobs. Dad owned a little florist shop, and, through my childhood and adolescence, I marveled at the joy and warmth I found each and every time I entered Fred’s Flowers. The team – old Mr. Pateman, older Mrs. Brock, and young Maggie Smith (not the actress) – loved coming to work and the time spent there. Dad sure knew how to encourage humor and create a positive ethos.

[For her part] Mom moved from the accounting department to take on the position of Supervisor of Cashiers with the Greater Winnipeg Gas Company. I learned something different from her – how to fight for those dependent upon you. Along with fostering joy in the office, Mom would tenaciously defend her entirely female staff, who – the corporate world being what it was (and still is in many places) – were consistently disadvantaged in terms of salary and promotional opportunity. Not that long ago, I met one of her former employees, who proclaimed vigorously, “Your Mom was the best boss I ever had.”

Some time later, when I came of age and secured an upper-echelon position in the schools, I could hardly let on that I was modeling my administrative behavior after what I had seen in a small flower shop and a corporate cashier operation. [In truth, though, that’s precisely what I was doing.] . . . I began to think about the connection between tone, relationship-building, and creativity in all things, to the point where I hope it has become the hallmark of what I am about as an administrator. Today, more than ever, I’m convinced that Mom and Dad had it right.

— (McCluskey, in press, b)

Like most talented youngsters, McCluskey could become exasperated (and exasperating) at times. The difference, though, was how this young man dealt with his frustrations. During one particularly acute temper tantrum (the details of which are now long forgotten, perhaps having to do with parental demands to eat vegetables), young Kenneth decided that he was going to run away. However, after thinking about this for a while, it dawned on him that being away from home would be a life filled with challenges and hardships, all of which he was unwilling to endure. And besides, since his parents were the source of this one-off injustice, why should he have to suffer? Therefore, this righteous lad decided that instead of running away from home, he would bar the windows, lock the doors, turn the dead bolts, fasten the chains, and make his parents live out there in the cruel world. A diabolical strategy to be sure, Machiavellian in its complexity, and one which forced his parents to enter into protracted negotiations to modify their previous position on vegetables, before gaining re-admittance into young Kenneth's new stronghold. Mischievous? Certainly, but also undeniably creative.

Another example mentioned by former classmates, and one which I think aptly illustrates McCluskey's skill in bending the rules in his favor, took place in a junior high class. For one particular project in the class, the students were asked to draw the plans for, cut from wood, and stain a set of street address numbers that could be taken home as a gift for their parents. Despite whatever misgivings he may have had, he undertook this task with alacrity. He produced a very reasonable pair of ones, which, when secured on the outside of his family's home, would let passers-by know that this house was number 11. McCluskey received a passing grade for his work and took his completed project home to mom and dad, who were more than a little perplexed, for their street address was not 11, but 85! McCluskey felt that his limited technical skills would have made the task of cutting out an eight and a five far too painful and tedious, so he made an adjustment. (A lone one, he thought, would have been too suspicious, so 11 it was.) Again, the mischievousness is self-evident. However, we also have here a beautiful example of a young boy who quickly mastered the concept of working *smarter not harder*.

Looking beyond the ivory tower

From the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, McCluskey attended the University of Manitoba, where he completed his PhD in experimental psychology. As he has put it, "As a graduate student, my goal was always to emerge from the ivory tower and make a difference in the real world" (Van Bockern, 2012: 5). After graduation, he took up a position as a school psychologist with the Lord Selkirk School Division. Despite not fitting the standard mold, he rose rapidly to the ranks of senior administration (as Director of Student Services/Assistant to the Superintendent), and launched a variety of innovative initiatives and centers to support special needs, gifted, and at-risk students. His stay at Selkirk lasted more than two decades, and during this time he wrote many of his professional articles and chapters, plus several seminal books including *The Doubtful Gift: Strategies for Educating Gifted Children in the Regular Classroom* (McCluskey and Walker, 1986), *Challenge: Sourcebook of Gifted Education*, *Butterfly Kisses: Amber's Journey through Hyperactivity*, and *Lost Prizes: Talent Development and Problem*

Solving with At-Risk Students. These and other works cemented his reputation for connecting theory, research, and practice in a user-friendly fashion.

One undertaking borne in Lord Selkirk is worthy of further elaboration. First conceived in 1991, *Lost Prizes* used intensive creative problem solving (CPS) training (Treffinger et al., 2006), mentoring (Lamoureux et al., 2008; McCluskey and Mays, 2003), and other strength-based interventions (Brendtro et al., 2002; Brendtro and du Toit, 2005) to reclaim unengaged, relationship-resistant youth. McCluskey has succinctly described what has become his signature program as follows:

Lost Prizes was an attempt to reclaim talented, at-risk high school dropouts who – their abilities notwithstanding – had been lost to the system. Almost all had withdrawn or been removed from their schools, and most were doing nothing and going nowhere. At best, they were floating aimlessly; at worst, they had run seriously afoul of the law. Substance abuse was prevalent. Our goal was to reconnect with these capable young people, awake dormant creative potential, and motivate them to do something more meaningful with their lives.

— (Van Bockern, 2012: 6)

Lost Prizes and other spin-off projects were very successful and had a marked impact on a large number of individuals. During his years in the school division, McCluskey was also involved in developing programs for aboriginal students, another group often given short shrift in Canadian schools and society.

Reshaping the tower

Fortunately for us at the University of Winnipeg, in 1998 McCluskey decided to “retreat” (his term) to the world of academe. As he put it, “after almost two and a half decades in the field, the ivory tower started to look pretty good” (Van Bockern, 2012: 6).

In any case, soon after his arrival, the education program began to change significantly. McCluskey has described the process of creating a faculty identity in the following way:

It has been [almost 15 years] since some of us seasoned veterans in Education at the University of Winnipeg had our first conversation concerning the need to reach out to the community around us. The facts were inescapable: We are the inner-city university – the campus that sits in the heart of downtown, surrounded by all the “typical” core-area problems. Entering our institution each day, the faculty and staff see firsthand the desperation of homelessness, the degradation of drugs, and the desolation of life in youth gangs. These realities confront us as we arrive each morning, and as we return with caution (some using “safe walk”) to our vehicles in the evening.

For those involved in that initial discussion, it seemed obligatory to strive to become more a part of, not apart from, the challenges of our immediate environs. Yes, we had a responsibility to do the things a good education program does: to deliver solid curriculum, instruction, and assessment courses; to add an abundance of other relevant offerings into the hopper; and to build upon theoretical foundations by putting in place strong practicum experiences for our teachers-to-be. But we wanted to be more than merely a “good” program. In a quest for improvement and social relevance, then, our mandate gradually grew

to encompass urban, inner-city issues; our mission broadened to include contributing to the community; and our identity coalesced around the themes of justice, equality, and enrichment and talent development for all, including populations that had been hitherto marginalized. In the process of forging this expanded identity, new courses were developed that emphasized “all of the above,” outreach projects were launched (starting with some significant mentoring ventures), and practicum was reconfigured to take advantage of and feature the unique opportunities that abound in inner-city classrooms. Over time, we found it surprisingly natural to build upon local initiatives and, in an effort to instill a spirit of true global citizenship within our students, to move on to service delivery projects on an international scale.

— (McCluskey, in press, a)

McCluskey had a near meteoric rise from new kid on the block to full professor, and he once again became an administrator – Associate Dean for Dr Annabelle Mays – in 2003. McCluskey always credits Annabelle with lobbying our faculty into existence, establishing an incredibly solid foundation, and recruiting and bringing him along in an often-complex university environment. Upon her retirement, he became Dean of Education in 2005. Being firmly ensconced in the academic setting gave McCluskey more time to work and publish with various “names” in the areas of creative thinking, gifted education, and reclaiming at-risk children and youth, including Treffinger, Isaksen, Noller, Feldhusen, Renzulli, Torrance, Brendtro, and Van Bockern. McCluskey acknowledges his debt to these trailblazers, and is quick to add that part of their greatness was that they never expected others simply to duplicate the work they had already done, but rather encouraged colleagues to find their own way, carve out their own turf, and make their own reputations. It is a wise and humble approach that he has modeled at the university.

During McCluskey’s tenure, the Faculty of Education at the University of Winnipeg has grown exponentially, to the point where we now have almost 1800 students in our various streams. His focus has been on academe, practice, and service, on *educational* management rather than educational *management* (McCluskey, in press, b). McCluskey’s approach to teacher education has not been limited to the courses offered as part of the BEd program. The faculty and staff are often given the opportunity to work on very unique programs that extend learning beyond the four walls of a classroom, for students from all walks of life and all socioeconomic backgrounds. These programs are special in that they allow disadvantaged children to interact with professionals who are willing to look past their struggles to see their potential, often for the first time in their lives. Despite his many academic accomplishments, it is this work – supporting unengaged populations in discovering and developing their talents and strengths as fully as possible – where McCluskey’s creativity is most evident.

Dean McCluskey’s administrative accomplishments are legion: he has organized major gifted and at-risk education conferences at the University of Winnipeg; prepared a successful proposal to have the headquarters of the World Council for Gifted and Talented Children (WCGTC) housed on our campus (from 2005 to 2010); secured the right to deliver a Post-Baccalaureate Diploma in Education (PBDE) for teachers in the field (and worked with faculty members to offer special education, at-risk, and

counseling streams of this diploma); developed proposals resulting in some joint master's programs with institutions in Australia and the USA; obtained funding to put in place significant mentoring initiatives (where our education students provide support, guidance, and direction for inner-city children and youth); and launched a variety of major international ventures (including PBDE and other training with partnering schools in Brazil, Haiti, and India; delivery of our after-degree program in satellite campuses in Thailand and beyond; and practicum experiences for our students in Thailand, China, Germany, Greece, Costa Rica, and elsewhere).

As part of his ongoing commitment to scholarship, McCluskey has continued his prolific writing: he has co-edited *Enriching Teaching and Learning for Talent Development* with Don Treffinger, and second editions of the *Mentoring for Talent Development* and the *Thoughts about Tone . . .* books are in the works, as well as a third edition of the attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) text, now entitled *ADHD: Disorder or Gift*. Additionally, his "Amphitheater Model" (an approach to recognizing and developing talent) and the new, evolving "Lost Prizes Model" have been refined and outlined in *Lost Prizes: Manitoban and International Initiatives to Identify and Develop the Talents of At-Risk Populations* (McCluskey et al., 2012).

Characteristics of creativity

The four dimensions of innovation laid out by Guilford (1950) and adopted by Torrance (1974) and others to describe and assess creativity are fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration. Clearly, these characteristics are evident throughout the life and work of Dr. McCluskey. By no means all-encompassing, these four characteristics of creativity have served as a guide to help me frame my thinking and consider issues.

Fluency

Essentially, fluency refers simply to the number of ideas an individual can generate. Anyone who has sat in on meetings with McCluskey knows that idea generation is no problem at all for him. Very often, he simply keeps his own counsel and says very little. When he chooses to offer ideas; however, they are usually many and varied. McCluskey has noted there are an abundance of products, programs, and strategies readily available that can help people generate enough ideas within an hour to keep them busy for 1000 years. Given the right setting and the right tools, coming up with ideas is not the issue in McCluskey's view. The real challenge begins when trying to make these ideas work or come to life in the so-called real world. McCluskey has spent the better part of his career bringing innovative ideas to life in settings such as the public school system or universities, where barriers of financial and human resources, attitudes, and tradition can potentially stand in the way of making things happen. Yet, despite these institutional barriers, he has breathed life into many of his ideas, which have in turn served the overarching belief that no child is disposable and that genuine talent can be found in any child given the right opportunity.

Flexibility

Flexibility refers to the number of different ideas that are produced. When he first came to what was then a small program, not yet a faculty of education, certain members on the interview committee mentioned that it would be nice if someone from education might win one of the four major university awards (for excellence in teaching, research, community service, and governance). At that time, no one had done so. McCluskey has now received all four honors. It is easy to recognize that earning an award for research and scholarship demands a widely different skill set than that required for administration and university self-governance. Moreover, both of these in turn are very different from the skill sets needed for community service or teaching excellence. The recognition he has been granted by his students and colleagues in each of these four categories highlights his great flexibility. McCluskey clearly has a lot of information and experiences to draw upon, to help him take a very broad perspective and generate many thoughts.

Originality

Originality refers to the quality or uniqueness of the ideas. McCluskey's close colleagues know he views the world through a different lens and thinks of things no one else does. Many of his ideas are decidedly out of the norm. (In the idea-generation training exercise involving naming things "red and hot," very few people would respond irreverently, as McCluskey did, with "Joan of Arc.") His career offers a real-life case study in, if we can draw on the sport of boxing for an analogy, a pragmatic stick-and-move approach, creatively changing systems through the implementation of new ideas.

The notion of policy transfer is why so many good programs do not translate successfully to different settings. It is not that there is anything necessarily wrong with the original itself; rather, it has to do with the practice of trying to duplicate something that grew naturally to serve a particular population or purpose at a particular point in time. McCluskey has often warned of these dangers in his writing. In his text, *The Doubtful Gift* (McCluskey and Walker, 1986), he spoke directly regarding the need for originality in program development and service delivery. Interestingly, he also advised his readers never to follow or attempt to employ his model to the letter; he meant it only as a guide to help educators develop their own original framework to fit their own unique needs of the school, students, staff, community, and individuals. Specifically, he noted that the model was meant

... as a gentle reminder and guide to those who are looking for some initial direction and focus. It is designed not for system-wide implementation, but to give one possible philosophical direction and some concrete, practical ideas and tools to those who are interested.

— (McCluskey & Walker, 1986: 110)

This encouragement for people to find their own creative truths, and to refrain from becoming mere disciples, has remained consistent throughout McCluskey's career. It is an attitude of support that he has carried into his work as a high-level administrator in the university setting.

The original *Lost Prizes* program was first conceived, developed, and run in consultation with Donald Treffinger during a CPS seminar held in Sarasota, Florida. In that session, “Team Canada” – composed of McCluskey, his wife Andrea, Phil Baker, and Seamus O’Hagan – worked with the group gathered at the Center for Creative Learning (Treffinger, Scott Isaksen, Ruth Noller, and John Feldhusen). As part of that idea-generating process, the notion of an alternative education program that focused on strength-based approaches when working with young people, as well as the matching of young people to mentors from the community, began to take shape.

Elaboration

The programmatic details of *Lost Prizes*, first set out over a period of days, were made real during weeks and months of careful negotiation, planning, strategizing, problem solving, and responding to crises as they arose. It represented an expression of creativity that stretched well beyond simply getting an idea. It required elaboration; the process of adding and filling in details, which in turn required an abundance of persistence.

McCluskey talked about elaboration in terms of creating a sense of excitement for new projects before they have been fully developed. The idea behind it, which is all about creating interest, is actually a clever way of removing potential future difficulties right at the beginning. This is done through a process that is equal parts salesmanship, promotion, and the generation of excitement. Once you have achieved an appropriate amount of interest and excitement for your up-and-coming project, the next stage of fully bringing this project to life is made that much easier. McCluskey calls this *filling in the façade*.

This idea of filling in the façade is perhaps not without precedent. In reference to the creative process, it has to do with the capacity of some creative people to start with an idea that is perhaps unfamiliar or suspect to the masses, and yet be able to see the long-term potential. To then be able to take that idea and win people over with the same efforts of promotion, salesmanship, and generation of excitement is the essence of buying low and selling high. And certainly, projects like *Lost Prizes* reflect a high level of successful intelligence.

Others

There are many other traits associated with creativity such as curiosity, imagination, playfulness, complexity, independence, tolerance of ambiguity, capacity to make order from chaos, high energy, and risk-taking (Isaksen et al., 2011). All fit McCluskey; he can be exceedingly curious, highly imaginative, and impishly playful. He is very independent, usually preferring to work alone and at great speed. He has an unbelievable tolerance for ambiguity and ability to make order from chaos. (To walk into his office during one of his writing binges is to be overwhelmed by the scores of books tossed all over the floor, the papers strewn about, the flurry of activity, and the hundreds of icons on his computer monitor.) He has incredible energy at the peak of his activity when he moves at a frenetic pace. Importantly though, he does have an off-switch as well, and he enjoys plenty of family relaxation time. He certainly seems almost sublimely unconcerned with budgetary, personal, and institutional risks – he does not allow them to get in the way of making good things happen for his constituency.

McCluskey – with his well-known problem with authority – is not hesitant to challenge the powers-that-be. In his view, blind obedience is a root cause of societal injustice, prejudice, and wars. He has little respect for pseudo-intellectualism, academic hubris, and what he views as elitist institutions such as fraternities and sororities. Once he commits himself to an undertaking, his perseverance and resolve are legendary. When asked to discuss his “failures” during the interview for his first term as Dean, he replied, “I don’t have failures; I have setbacks.”

One thing McCluskey pushes back on is the unthinking overuse of standardized, high-stakes testing. When so much is riding on a test score (huge life-changing consequences such as entrance into university, access to scholarships and bursaries, and indeed even self-esteem or -worth), the cost of making mistakes is extremely high. In some cases, this results in the development of students who are excellent test-takers and yet stymied when it comes to creativity, self-expression, and critical thinking. Moreover, traditional, typically biased tests tend to penalize disadvantaged, minority students and/or those struggling with poverty and unfortunate life circumstances.

McCluskey recognizes that there is a time and a place for assessment, but he is also very comfortable with using tests in non-traditional ways. The intent should be to identify strengths and weaknesses for programming purposes; what some in the area of gifted and talented education have referred to as dynamic testing (Matthews and Foster, 2009). This is an approach to assessment grounded in the belief that results should guide service delivery, but not be used as a means of categorizing, labeling, or giving students and their families false perceptions of what tests may say about the potential of the child. There is a growing awareness in Manitoba schools concerning the dangers of putting too much stock in the meaning of standardized test scores. Teachers, administrators, and clinicians recognize that these scores give only a snapshot of where students may be at a particular point in time and say nothing of who they are overall, what they are capable of, or how they should view themselves in reference to school and scholastic expectations. This growing awareness is a breath of fresh air, or, more accurately, a necessary questioning of the trend toward standardization that has remained unchecked for far too long.

Of particular concern for McCluskey is the overinflated value and blind faith surrounding “intelligence testing.” While the IQ test and its relatives may still be the prevailing method and benchmark for identifying giftedness in some parts of the world, in Manitoba most schools recognize the cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic biases inherent in these measures. As our communities become more and more multicultural, the use of such high-stakes standardized tests becomes more and more inappropriate and unresponsive to the changing reality of public schools. Of course, truly creative thinkers have the ability to look past the mythology surrounding intelligence testing, and to recognize that despite years of the loud and sometimes obnoxious monologue that has been IQ, a test is simply that: a test. The scores do not necessarily represent the ability, potential, or capability of most individuals.

Creating an innovative environment

Ekvall (1983, 1996), in his study of Swedish companies, delineated several specific factors that contribute to positive organizational climate and creativity in the workplace.

Building on this base and using their own situational outlook questionnaire, Isaksen and his team (including Ekvall) further refined the climate factors into nine environmental dimensions conducive to creativity: challenge and involvement, freedom, trust and openness, idea time, playfulness and humor, (absence of) conflict, idea support, debate, and risk-taking (Isaksen et al., 1999). Such factors are as relevant for schools as they are for business. McCluskey (in press, b) has written and spoken at length about the importance of these dimensions for “creating creative environments creatively.” His argument has been that the tone or workplace climate that is created for and by those involved, and can either help or hinder the creative process in significant ways. It is not that individuals who find themselves in a less than favorable context will not be able to express their creativity, but simply that those environments that are more favorable are more likely to see greater levels of creative expression over time. McCluskey has taken it upon himself to explore and develop key themes for other administrators to be aware of in their efforts to create healthy climates for creativity. He strives to make all of these nine elements a part of our faculty.

Playfulness and humor

McCluskey values and uses humor in all aspects of his life. Even when under pressure, he tends to respond with subtle, understated wit. One typical example: when asked about his tendency to hang out with his “old boys’ club” (of Phil Baker, Joe Goulet, and Alan Wiebe), McCluskey quickly responded that at this stage in life he had hoped to have many “young female friends with benefits.” He then mused, “I almost made it; I’ve now got these ‘old male friends with deficits’” (Personal Communication, 14 December 2012). On another occasion at our faculty club, a server asked McCluskey if he was enjoying the pasta. He replied, “Of course, I’m an alpha-ghetti male” (Personal Communication, 14 December 2012).

At University, McCluskey uses playfulness and humor to help set a pleasant, innovative tone. He believes that learning should be fun, and that creative ideas often emerge when people are relaxed and comfortable. In his user-friendly writings, he employs humor and real-life examples to help readers understand and remember the salient points. Steve Van Bockern once remarked that “Ken says important things in interesting ways” (Personal Communication, 15 May 2001), and Don Treffinger noted that his work is “grounded” firmly in the literature. In his review of McCluskey’s book on ADHD, Treffinger observed, “Sensitive readers, once they have stopped laughing, will know that they have been touched by something special” (Treffinger, 2001).

Gentle, self-deprecating humor has always been a big part of the total workplace climate that McCluskey has worked hard to create for his staff and students. He is a bit of a joker (his style is not at all slapstick, but rather subtle, sarcastic, and devious). His playfulness and humor go a long way toward creating a sense of security and belonging for those involved in our university, so that it safe for them to freewheel, make mistakes, and take creative risks.

Idea time

McCluskey often quotes US President Barack Obama, who has complained about being so overbooked that he does not have enough time left for deep reflection. And truly, if

every moment of one's day is scheduled, when does one think? When does one look beyond the parameters of the job? When does one come up with creative ideas?

McCluskey has said publicly and unapologetically that, since he is ultimately paid to think, he does not worry about spending plenty of time in the faculty club. His argument is that many ideas are generated during relaxation, and not necessarily when people are stretched over the rack of busy work and excessive accountability. Obviously, the discovery of new ideas is not limited to organized group brainstorming sessions; it may also occur while walking, driving, playing racquetball, or blowing the froth off a cold beer. While so many others are emailing all day long, McCluskey talks with people about their professional passions and projects, all the while listening and reacting positively to their ideas. The calm serenity he radiates is in fact quite soothing and encouraging.

Guarding against groupthink

McCluskey has for years warned others in education of the dangers of groupthink (Janis, 1971, 1972), the intellectually dead zone where conformity and adherence to tradition trump critical thinking and innovation. Critical thinking and innovation are both recognized as characteristics of creativity. The black hole of groupthink is the antithesis of both. When everyone working in a school, school district, or university think too much alike, creativity can be virtually obliterated. This is a phenomenon which has been studied in depth, a fascinating human occurrence by which individuals allow themselves to be intellectually lulled by their need to belong, fit in, and be liked by their peers. Frequently, it is characterized by a passionate defense of a particular leader or prevailing theory, such that troubling questions and criticisms are ignored or angrily shut down. In this environment, it becomes harder and harder for those involved to see past the boundaries of their own despotic philosophic strongholds, or to consider the experiences, feelings, or perspectives of others. We can find the symptoms of groupthink all around us: in academic disciplines, in politics, and even among some who have made careers talking about creativity itself!

McCluskey pays attention to strategies for guarding against groupthink (by having personnel break into subgroups for intensive discussions, deferring decisions when possible until after "last chance" meetings, permitting others to play the role of devil's advocate, and encouraging faculty and staff to express dissenting opinions). He helps the creativity of faculty and staff to emerge by delegating with a vengeance and allowing them to develop and take charge of their own projects (Sternberg and Lubart, 1995).

One of the factors behind the positive gains in many Manitoba schools is the quality of teacher training and professional development guided by McCluskey. He has been the coryphaeus of a number of new and exciting initiatives whose philosophical underpinnings represent a dynamic, flexible, and enlightened approach to working with otherwise disengaged children, particularly students at risk of not succeeding in mainstream classrooms. Unfortunately, this often means those who are in cultural minorities. In Manitoba it is aboriginal students who are most often cast aside by rigid, inflexible education approaches.

A spirit of service: leveling the playing field for unengaged students

McCluskey has great respect for Robert Greenleaf's (2002) work on "servant leadership." McCluskey states clearly that educators should make an effort to "do things that matter," and, for him, "talent without service is an empty vessel" (Personal Communication, 14 December 2012). McCluskey's career has been characterized by creative service for others.

Marginalized children

McCluskey's commitment to the philosophy that talent and potential can sometimes be found in unlikely locales, led him to work in the service of disadvantaged populations, culturally diverse young people, and students who many others had simply written off. The result has been a wealth of exciting and innovative work, both his own and from those whom he mentored.

McCluskey (2000) suggested that educators ought not to "draw lines in the sand" that essentially force at-risk, nonconforming students out the door. He urges teachers and other caregivers to become "talent scouts" or "talent spotters" (Young, 1995), who seek to identify the undiscovered, untapped gifts of children and youth. Furthermore, he feels we should expand our talent searches and begin "looking for gifts in all the wrong places" (McCluskey, 2011), such as among the disadvantaged, within minority groups, in special education classrooms, and in young persons' centers.

Quite controversially, McCluskey has written about the need to engage with some of the most troubled young people in a chapter entitled *Youth Gangs: Cesspool or Talent Pool?* (Baker et al., 2003). He asks educators to consider what incredible talent it takes to become a successful member or leader of a youth gang. It is evil, misdirected, and fraught with danger, yes; but talent nonetheless. The goal with this population must be to identify and redirect such talent in more positive, productive directions. McCluskey often uses a quote from the late Robert B. Parker (2005), author of the popular Spenser mystery novels, who described gang kids in this way:

They are often quite ingenious. They function barely at all in school, and the standard aptitude tests seem beyond them, and yet they are very intelligent about surviving in fearful conditions. They are often resourceful, they fashion what they need out of what they have. They endure in conditions that would simply suffocate most of the Harvard senior class.

— (Parker, 2005: 221–2)

McCluskey agrees with Gharabaghi (2008) that in many cases "Relationships . . . are the intervention" (Gharabaghi, 2008: 31). In other words, connecting with disconnected students begins with strong relationships between teacher and student, relationships that reflect mutual respect, a willingness to accept differences, positive expectations, and some flexibility. This approach is at the core of why McCluskey's work has been so successful, and why he has been so widely respected throughout the years. His projects and writings have been all about finding the talents and abilities of students who are anything but teacher pleasers; the relationship-resistant ones who neither conform nor fit.

Even when considering populations that much of society had already written off, McCluskey has always held true to the belief that there are no *bad kids*. As one of his students, I learned very early in my career that some of the most challenging behavior that I may encounter from students in classrooms has more to do with unmet needs than with “badness.” The *bad kids* notion is simply a perspective that some teachers bring into their classrooms. Instead of building a career around celebrating the work of students who are already successful, McCluskey has chosen to develop meaningful and academically sound methods of discovering that same potential for success among students who may seem to some to be unlikely candidates.

McCluskey would concur that there are also “no disposable kids” (Brendtro et al., 2005). As Peterson (1997) has pointed out, the “tough bright” rarely find their way into gifted programs. However, socially we cannot afford to waste the talent of so many students simply because they failed to conform to rigid expectations or standardized ideals of achievement. As McCluskey and Treffinger (1998) asked:

What is the “cost” of a symphony unwritten, a cure not discovered, a breakthrough not invented? In today’s complex world, and in preparing for tomorrow’s certainly more complex one, we can scarcely afford to waste “talent capital” of any sort.

— (McCluskey and Treffinger, 1998: 216)

In-the-trenches programming

McCluskey is known as the creator, innovator, coordinator, and overall driving force behind *Lost Prizes*, a host of follow-up projects, and large-scale mentoring programs; initiatives that have been quite rightly implemented and celebrated internationally. Many of these programs, designed to genuinely engage with otherwise disengaged youth, had to be fought for and defended vigorously, while working within a societal context that was often inflexible, dogmatic, and slow to respond to the potential challenges of diversity. Through these struggles McCluskey helped to encourage many bright, talented, capable young people who might otherwise have been forever lost to the school system.

Owing to *Lost Prizes*, a collection of programs, support sessions, and training opportunities has taken root in many parts of the world, where educators are embracing its unique approach to working with bright but troubled youngsters. It is an “enrichment for at-risk” approach which blends the literature and strategies from both areas. This type of hybrid programming is rarely seen in education systems, where behaviorally challenging students do not usually end up being placed in high-ability groups or exposed to higher-order thinking skills. *Lost Prizes* reflects the best of McCluskey’s experience and insights over the years in responding to the challenges, providing professional development for teachers, and offering ground-level, in-the-trenches support for youth in places as diverse as Manitoba First Nations communities, youth detention centers, economically depressed urban neighborhoods, and underdeveloped areas in Kenya, Thailand, Haiti, and other countries.

This year, *Lost Prizes* International, with the International Centre for Innovation in Education (ICIE), will launch its new *International Journal for Creativity and Talent*

Development. Further, this coming July, the first annual *Lost Prizes* seminars will be held at the University of Winnipeg. This ICIE-sponsored event will bring together international scholars in gifted and at-risk education, University of Winnipeg faculty, leaders of award-winning programs, and teachers and student groups from the field. This professional development initiative will involve the production of new books and programs, including a major new *Lost Prizes* text. *Lost Prizes* coffee will be on sale at this conference, in schools, and in a variety of other venues. Proceeds from the conference, the publications, the coffee sales, and other fundraising will go towards supporting programming for talented, at-risk young people.

Aboriginal populations

McCluskey's work with students from minority-group backgrounds has been particularly important here in Manitoba, where the fastest growing demographics are aboriginal peoples and New Canadians immigrating from across the globe. This means the most rapidly growing clientele in the Manitoba education system includes those made most vulnerable by standardized practices, inflexible institutional structures, and narrow attitudes that are at best outdated and and at worst intolerant (Lamoureux, 2009, in press). As the face of Manitoba classrooms continues to change, a steadfast adherence to now outdated, inflexible educational practices will simply not get the job done. Large numbers of people have rallied around McCluskey and his projects in recognition that many of those practices and assumptions have served only very specific cultural and socioeconomic groups, who were already well positioned for success in the public school system.

Several leaders in Manitoba, in education and in government, have long since realized that we cannot afford to turn a blind eye to the fact that many of the tools of our trade do not serve students of all backgrounds. If we are to succeed socially, economically, and educationally, we must be creative not only in our efforts to build meaningful relationships with all of our students and their families, but also in our attempts to identify talent and potential. A new understanding of giftedness is necessary, an understanding that extends not only beyond the narrow and outdated limitations of IQ, but also beyond traditional academics and standardized achievement.

Isaksen et al. (2011) described the characteristics of creativity as including the capacity for risk-taking, complexity, openness, independence, and the ability to make order from chaos. These are reflected in McCluskey's efforts to move beyond outdated deficit-based practices and archaic paradigms within the realm of gifted education. He influenced the growing trend in Manitoba toward inclusiveness, true multiculturalism, and approaches to talent development that reflect a broad range of abilities, perspectives, and cultures.

McCluskey worked with students in more than 50 First Nation communities. His *Northern Lights* project helped large numbers of unengaged Aboriginal young people turn their lives around, while *Second Chance* markedly reduced the recidivism rates among First Nations inmates in provincial jails. These projects have been described often in the literature, most recently in McCluskey's latest *Lost Prizes* monograph (McCluskey et al., 2012).

As Canadian demographics continue to change, there is an increasingly urgent need for flexible thinking in education. Young people from minority backgrounds, including aboriginal students, deserve teachers who are able to recognize that cultural differences can stand in the way of one's ability to identify talent, especially when it is camouflaged in stagnant, biased educational settings. Aboriginal learners have frequently found themselves on the losing end of the tension between diverse cultural perspectives and rigid educational models that have failed to adapt over time. Manitoba graduation rates reflect the dismal results when students without power, many lacking the social capital and socioeconomic advantages of their peers (and come to school carrying a cultural history of mistrust), are locked into a system which is insensitive to their needs.

Working to address the academic and social challenges facing Aboriginal students has been a struggle for many non-aboriginal teachers, especially since they typically have no personal experience whatsoever with such challenges. Canada's colonial history, particularly its history with residential schools, has left behind what can only be described as tragic circumstances for many aboriginal families. We render ourselves ineffective when we fail to recognize that many students from aboriginal families are not coming to school with the same resources or privilege as other learners.

Some have made the ignorant, borderline racist argument that all aboriginal students learn in a single learning style, or that they are all *this* or all *that* (as if any cultural group could be described as a singular, uniform entity like some nicely packaged bundle of ethnic curiosity). While such assumptions may serve marketing purposes or the need to label some group different than one's own (as the oversimplified, culturally primitive *other*), the reality of human behavior and culture is much more complex and beautiful than these claims would suggest. The notion that all aboriginal students are _____ (insert stereotype here) simply does not fit the much more nuanced nature of reality.

With McCluskey's leadership, the University of Winnipeg has adopted a more creative and equitable approach in responding to the learning needs of disadvantaged populations, including aboriginal peoples. He has been involved in hiring several aboriginal faculty and staff, myself included, and empowered them to make a difference. Our strategy has been to focus on strength-based approaches to education that extend far beyond narrow definitions of talent and ability. We also encourage veteran, new, and future teachers to challenge stereotypical assumptions regarding aboriginal peoples by focusing on the development of genuinely respectful relationships with students and their families. We hope that the teachers we train are beginning to recognize that older assumptions regarding IQ tests, standardized measures of ability, and definitions of giftedness are simply that: assumptions. We encourage educators to consider the possibility that many learning outcomes and curriculum items are bound up in perspectives that may not be universally accepted. There are wonderful opportunities for high-level critical thinking exercises in questioning the cultural origins of many so-called truths within any curriculum. The more that we as educators respect our own perspective, along with those of others from diverse backgrounds, the more likely we are to see growing successes amongst all of our students.

Despite the powerful post-colonial forces acting as barriers to the success of aboriginal students in Canada, we must not allow teachers to be burdened with a sense of guilt or shame if they are members of the dominant society. Multicultural education should never

be about guilt, it should be about a fundamental belief in the idea that diversity enriches all learners and contributes to the social success of Canada in general. We do not bully our students with guilt, shame, or emotional outpourings. Instead our classes on multicultural education, including those that look at recognizing giftedness among culturally diverse populations, are about empowering teachers to find innovative approaches to creating classroom environments, where all students are able to discover and develop their strengths and talents as fully as possible. McCluskey has made possible and supported our efforts in many ways.

Living it

McCluskey's career, both as a school psychologist and an academic, has been characterized by a very *sui generis* approach to working with young people. His talents have not gone unnoticed; he is the recipient of awards for creativity (e.g., from ICIE and the WCGTC) and for program development (e.g., the prestigious Wolf Project Award and the Spirit of Crazy Horse Award from Reclaiming Youth International). Although he accepts these recognitions graciously, McCluskey does not pay much attention to them – there are no diplomas hanging on his walls. Similarly, although he is a popular keynote speaker on many topics, McCluskey does not typically lobby or volunteer to appear at high-profile events. If asked, and if available, he will speak, whether it be to a huge gathering or to staff in a small, isolated rural school. He seems comfortable in the limelight, but does not seek it in the slightest.

McCluskey is a family man, who lives for his wife, colleague, and soul mate Andrea; his son Chris and daughter-in-law Kari (both educators in their own right, who, not surprisingly, run The Infinity Program, an off-site initiative to support unengaged students in the Interlake School Division); his daughter Amber (a teacher of a learning assistance classroom in an inner-city school in Winnipeg); and his six grandchildren (some of whom are already showing signs of social activism). This, along with a small group of colleagues and friends, is his reference group. He does not pay much attention to what others may say or what the media may write.

People are often struck by McCluskey's unconcern about money – he has never really worried about it or been much interested in conspicuous consumption or creature comforts. He is not about “planned simplicity” (in his case, “planned poverty” might be more accurate); it is just that he seems almost oblivious to the need for material possessions. Although generally well liked, McCluskey and his wife are unassuming and rather reclusive. They take quiet pleasure in their weekend jaunts in their basic vehicle to their basic condo in Gimli (just over an hour north of Winnipeg) to watch movies on their basic television set. Through the week, they keep a basic, one-room inner-city apartment just across from the university. McCluskey can often be seen wandering around the core area, dressed very simply, and he seems delighted with simple pleasures. As his son Chris says about inner-city problems, “Everyone is going to save the day, but no one stays the night” (McCluskey and McCluskey, 2012); but McCluskey and his wife do. McCluskey has had opportunities to move to bigger jobs in more prestigious settings, but he appears perfectly content staying put.

For McCluskey, success will be measured in the quality of the society left behind for his grandchildren. Ideally, he would have them educated in schools where all students are allowed to discover and develop their talents and strengths as fully as possible. Such schools are those in which learning is built upon a foundation of genuine relationships and mutual respect; where diversity is seen as a point of strength and never as a weakness. For it is in the recognition of talent, in all of its diverse expressions, that future generations will be able to enjoy a society that is environmentally sustainable, economically stable, and socially secure for all of its citizens. A life lived through creativity is one that serves these ends, and it is one that McCluskey has modeled gracefully here at the University of Winnipeg.

Recently, Don Ambrose, editor of the *Roeper Review*, said of McCluskey that

... in addition to his optimism, persistence, diligence, and powerful sense of purpose, what strikes me as most impressive about Ken is his deep-seated sense of ethics. Personal gain and recognition are the last things on his mind. ... If more individuals in more professions and academic disciplines thought and acted like Ken and his teammates, this would indeed be a better world.

— (Ambrose, 2012: 2)

I agree.

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