

UPCYCLING SHELTERED WORKSHOPS

A REVOLUTIONARY APPROACH FOR
TRANSFORMING WORKSHOPS
INTO CREATIVE SPACES

Susan Dlouhy and Patty Mitchell

Foreword by Lynn M. Harter

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foreword

SHELTERED WORKSHOPS ACROSS the United States offer vocational and rehabilitative services for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. These workshops are populated with well-intentioned staff, individuals who coordinate resources, including employment opportunities, for the people they serve. Production specialists organize facility-based employment, while other staff members arrange integrated, community-based employment. Over the past ten years, however, prospects for facility-based work have declined, and the supply of integrated employment opportunities has not kept pace with demand. In short, the system is broken. Policy makers and citizens alike must confront a pressing societal dilemma: the need to create expressive and vocational opportunities for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. In this volume, Susan Dlouhy and Patty Mitchell offer a revolutionary and compelling solution to the sheltered workshop problem—the Creative Abundance Model.

Dlouhy and Mitchell begin with an appreciative stance toward people, organizations, and communities. Despite frequent and earnest discussions of putting the principles of self-determination and thinking ability first, the provision of services in sheltered workshops continues to be organized around people's limitations. Deficit-oriented models focus on shortcomings and envision resources as scarce. As a result, program design can limit people by inadvertently positioning them as bundles of pathologies or problems to be fixed. The Creative Abundance Model shifts the focus to people's interests and capacities. Dlouhy and Mitchell recognize and accept fallibility and vulnerability as part of the human condition; however, they position people's gifts as more powerful than their deficiencies or needs.

The Creative Abundance Model envisions workshops as spaces for creative activity. An artistic mindset is central to helping staff members break away from preconceived ways of seeing things. Rather than correcting or curing perceived imperfections, staff members help individuals identify and explore their interests. Starting from an appreciative standpoint, staff members provide resources and support for individuals to develop previously untapped gifts. Whether the staff elevates a table to accommodate wheelchairs, engages in conversations about the medium artists would like to work with, stirs paints, or cleans brushes, they do so with the intent of helping others follow their creative impulses and express themselves.

Participating artists are intrinsically rewarded by opportunities for self-expression. Just as important, though, is that artful practices provide a scaffold for achieving other goals, such as paid labor—and there is great dignity in being paid for one’s artwork. Drawing on years of experience, Dlouhy and Mitchell illustrate how workshops can embrace art as both creation (that is, process) and vocation (that is, product). In studios, products spring from artful expressions that gain consumers’ attention—sculptures, drawings, images, patterns, and collages. As products enter the marketplace, artists receive monetary compensation for their creativity. In sum, as illustrated throughout this volume, art represents a mechanism for both expression and employment. As such, art allows participants to become more fully integrated in community life.

I am optimistic that this book will help readers revolutionize how workshops serve their constituents. No project is ever complete or final. Even so, the Creative Abundance Model is a starting point for fostering progressive change. Dlouhy and Mitchell offer a set of practices worthy of modeling, and they encourage readers to imagine a future beyond the familiar. Envisioning alternative possibilities is the first step in shaping a more fulfilling social order.

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Sheltered workshops are typically housed in large communal spaces.

Turning workshops into creative community spaces changes the vibe. Painter Nancy, working her magic at the WASCO sheltered workshop. WASCO also has a studio in downtown Marietta, Ohio, called Heart to Art Galleria, where individuals make and sell their artwork. (WASCO, MARIETTA, OHIO)

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THE MOVEMENT TOWARD THE CREATIVE ABUNDANCE MODEL

THE CREATIVE ABUNDANCE MODEL takes existing sheltered workshop spaces and programs and turns them into places where people of all abilities are encouraged to experiment and investigate through their own personal talents and assets. What they discover is then worked into the larger goal of job creation and community outreach. The Creative Abundance Model draws on resources that we already have in communities across the country: large spaces where people gather, also known as “sheltered workshops.” These spaces, for the most part, already contain everything that we need to implement this new model. All it takes to do so is a shifting of the furniture and the mind. Such a shift turns these spaces into incubators of discovery, where creativity can flourish and previously separated communities can come together.

The Creative Abundance Model also offers a compromise. There is a national movement to close sheltered workshops and move people into integrated community settings. Many family members and service providers, though, are saying, “Wait! That won’t work for everybody.” It is not our intent to resolve this debate. It is also not our intent to see every sheltered workshop closed. What we offer is an option for using what we already have and transforming it to provide

opportunities for integration, collaboration, and greater community acceptance for individuals who have perceived intellectual disabilities. We want to revolutionize programming, but that doesn't mean that we need to start all over again. We propose using existing spaces and resources, revolutionizing the programming. As with every movement or revolution or evolution, there must be conciliation. The Creative Abundance Model offers one path toward a creative and productive middle ground.

A unique and compelling characteristic of many people with developmental disabilities is their inherent creativity. An average person with a developmental disability is much more likely to jump into a creative endeavor than is an average member of the larger community. They worry less about whether they are doing it right, whether they look silly, or whether they have the ability to embrace the process. They can enjoy painting simply because it feels good to paint, to see the colors mix and images form. They get lost in this moment. "Typical people" often have voices in their head that they have to squash before even attempting to put brush to paper: "What do you think you are doing? What a waste of time. You have no talent. People are going to judge you." And guess what? They talk themselves out of creating. But if you put materials out on a table in front of a group of people with cognitive differences and invite them to investigate, you will have participation and enthusiasm from some of the finest, most creative people on the planet.

Through creative investigation, we discover individual interests and talents while delivering programming options within a group. If we say, "Replicate this thing" (as with crafts), we are just asking people to re-create someone else's idea. If their gingerbread figures do not look like the original example, they have fallen short. We often see a staff member jump in and finish the project to make it look like everyone else's. There is little creativity involved in replicating something. It is already designed and created. It has nothing to do with the individual. Accepting and embracing the idea that a project doesn't have to be a perfect copy of something is the first step into individual exploration.



Instead, take that paint, pencil, and paper and begin to draw and investigate. *That* is something new. There is evidence of self, some-



Jenny's beautiful fireweed flower drawing was enlarged onto a piece of plywood using an overhead projector. The wood was painted black, and colorful hand-painted fabric (repurposed sheets) was cut out and laminated onto the wood, creating the surface design and mimicking Jenny's original drawing. (HOPE STUDIOS, ANCHORAGE, ALASKA)

thing to talk about, and something through which others can see the creative energy of the designer. Now we are talking. If a person draws a portrait of her best friend, it tells a story about her. The artist can give it as a gift. Her friend hangs it in her office, and perhaps someone else asks the artist to draw him or her. The artist starts a portrait business! Someone loves her work and wants her to draw his pet. She starts making paintings of dogs. The local Humane Society has a show of her work. As a special incentive, people who adopt dogs in December also receive a portrait of their new pet. Another person helps make a drawing into a silver charm, and a fundraiser is held for



the movement toward the creative abundance model

the local dog shelter. The local news channel runs a story about this project, and other cities want to replicate what was done and sell the charms. This is not crazy talk. This is how events unfold and opportunities open up. Nothing exists until we first imagine, start making, and respond to opportunity.

What if people are not interested in visual art? What if they are not interested in painting, drawing, or sculpting? What is important is what they *are* interested in! What if they are drawn to theater, dance, magic, singing, poetry, fashion, comedy, or gardening? The process is no different. In explaining the Creative Abundance Model, we will use art as the primary example, but the concepts can apply to any area of interest.

The Creative Abundance Model takes existing workshop spaces and turns them into places where people can feel free to take risks, be creative, and explore. It also turns sheltered workshops into community centers, where everyone can feel supported, welcomed, and encouraged to be a creative being.

We have never come across a group of people more forgiving and patient than this population, who are just waiting for their support systems to get it together and provide the environment for investigation and creative exploration. It is as if they had been waiting all their lives for these opportunities. If we only had a magic wand, people with disabilities could be creative, outgoing, inventive, individualistic beings. Oh, wait! They already are!

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upcycling sheltered workshops

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