Week 4 || Ricarose & Michelle

Michelle: Welcome to our last PLIX Conversation Starter of our first Facilitating Creative Learning online course! In today's conversation we are joined by a real superstar of the creative learning community and a longtime collaborator of PLIX, Ricarose Roque. She'll talk to us about where we go from here to continue growing as facilitators of creative learning. Let's take a listen.

Ricarose: Hi, I'm Ricarose Roque. I'm a professor at the University of Colorado, Boulder. I direct the Family Creative Learning project and the Creative Communities research group.

Michelle: My name is Michelle Hlubinka, and I am the learning designer for PLIX. So let's dive into it!

Well, we are thrilled to have you here, Ricarose! How did you find your way from —I'm assuming—no doubt—a very driven high school student and an MIT undergraduate to the very different world of creative learning? Just how did you unlearn all that formal schooling that took place in what you and others call an "instructionist" environment?

Ricarose: I was a pretty driven, competitive, almost ruthless [laughs] high school student. I was just so intense and really determined to go to a great college, and part of that is I'm an immigrant, and I grew up in an immigrant family, and my parents were really on my case to go to college, college, college! But after a while they saw how intensely I internalized that, and they were telling me "Let's just go to the local community college—that would be great."

Fortunately, I got into MIT, and I was so thankful for the opportunity. One of the first people I met when I went to MIT was Mitchel Resnick who became— later—my PhD advisor, and he directs the Lifelong Kindergarten group at the MIT Media Lab. I took his freshman seminar where we explored technologies for creative learning. And we got to know the Pico cricket. We got to meet people from LEGO. We saw some early prototypes of Scratch. And at that time, I thought, "Oh, this is so fun, like, so cool to meet a professor, who does this kind of work", but even then I didn't take it as seriously. It's only when I—just by chance—I became involved with the StarLogo TNG project, which is a programming language for kids to engage in creating simulations and games. Even then, I was still pretty intense: trying to do the best software design I could.

Once I started working with kids and educators and really listening to kids and what they wanted to make and what they were interested in and how they wanted to do things, that's when I started to question a lot about what was happening in formal schooling. How much do we really listen to kids?

I don't think it's just in formal schooling. I think it's also in out-of-school spaces as well: how much should we really listen to kids and what they want to do and what kinds of things they want to make and how do they see themselves growing up or even how do they want to see themselves now?

I think those experiences working with kids—and kids like myself — I happened to be working in an area outside of Boston where there were a lot of immigrant communities—it just was a full-circle moment for me, where suddenly I was working with kids who shared a lot of my background. And it made me think a lot about how can you really engage young people in ways that respect who they are, where they come from, and how they're connected? I really resonated with ideas that I didn't know was called creative learning at the time, but an approach that supported their interests and connected them with other peers—engaged them in making things that they cared about.

Michelle: Do you find yourself drifting back to that instructionist model sometimes? Or how do you stave it off?

Ricarose: There are things to kind of build upon and remix from both instructionist and constructionist—or creative learning—environments. There are some structures and scaffolds from my schooling experiences that are great to also take into informal spaces. I also think there's some practices in informal spaces that are really great to bring into classroom experiences.

I think instead of trying to fight it, I try to think about ways to learn from both of these settings and experiences again to support youth to engage in these creative learning experiences. A lot of creative spaces, they might position learners as self-directed and ready to jump in. But that's not the case for a lot of people. They need a little bit more scaffolding in the beginning, or they need different kinds of entry points to engage them, and so I think there's a lot to learn in the ways that classrooms scaffold entry points for people to engage or how to build interest or build confidence. There's ways to learn from it, rather than trying to fight it.

Michelle: Can you give a specific example of some time where you had those two in balance?

Ricarose: One thing that I've appreciated—this relates to facilitators, actually—is teachers have this whole... they go through schools of education or certifications or ongoing professional development, and that sort of support and community-building isn't necessarily always built into

informal learning educators' experiences. Lots of them come in in different ways, whether they start by volunteering or starting off as an explainer or starting off as helping with the help desk and then they kind of gravitate towards a creative learning space in their organization. The community building, the professionalization—and some people would say there's some issues with professionalization. Seeing you as someone that has a professional trajectory in this area—is so interesting, and I'd love to see that more in how people see informal learning educators—that they are also people with a professional trajectory in this space and need constant support throughout their career to develop themselves as facilitators and educators.

Michelle: Thinking about both this idea of the career trajectory and what you mentioned earlier about seeing some similarities between the youth that you worked with near Boston and yourself: Can you say a little bit more about engaging youth who are traditionally underrepresented or non-dominant in STEM fields and bridging what you call the participation gap?

Ricarose: What's been really interesting about working with youth, who have been underrepresented or non-dominant in STEM fields is I can't help thinking about myself and my own trajectory. People might think "Here's an immigrant from a low-income community from an urban area fighting the odds, current MIT…" It sounds like "Oh, she must be so exemplary," but I see the ways that I'm an exception and the systemic barriers that prevent more youth, who have to face so many systems of oppression to participate.

Something for me that was really instrumental—there isn't a silver bullet answer to the ways that we engage—We have to think about it in so many ways, from the moment-to-moment decisions we make to institutional policy—for me, one thing that I kept coming back to as I was working with youth was the support that I got from my family: the ways that my family rallied around me and we rallied around each other. And when I was looking at programs that I thought were inspiring, I felt something that was missing was meaningful engagement with families, and how to really think of the whole family as this other learning context where youth were doing important identity work where they were shaping their values and what matters to them. These are the people that could potentially cheerlead them for the rest of their lives.

I mean family really broadly. Whether it's biological or found family or families in multiple configurations—just like the people that are going to rally around you: how do we engage them in the experiences that youth find meaningful, so youth don't have to advocate for their interests or explain or try to figure out the ways that their interests tie into what their family and community values? That it can be that negotiation together.

People talk a lot about the digital divide, and that you know, maybe we just need to give them the tools, or we just need to give them free access to the tools, or free access to spaces with the tools, but the participation gap focuses more on what are they actually doing once they have access. It's really trying to bring a conversation beyond access and looking at: Is their participation meaningful? Is their participation with these experiences leading to future opportunities that connect to what matters to them. Really being more critical of what's happening once you have access to these opportunities.

Michelle: When I first heard that you were focusing on working with families as a whole, rather than the youth in isolation coming to an out-of-school setting to interact with facilitators, but thinking about how that family context could be really an effective way to bring about change and make sure that these ways of thinking and habits of mind that we share in creative learning really stick because they get support at home as well for it: I just thought that was such a brilliant way to frame the work that you're doing.

Both you and I made our way through the Lifelong Kindergarten group at the Media Lab. I *love* telling people about that mindset of thinking of ourselves as continuing to play to learn all our lives long. It's a great reason why we're working with libraries through the PLIX program through the Digital Learning and Collaboration Studio, because librarians and library professionals of all stripes work with lifelong learners. I know that you are working in lots of different kinds of out-of-school contexts, including libraries and I wanted you talk a little bit about why you've chosen to work with libraries and, in particular your working with the Denver public library, I believe?

Ricarose: Yes, I've been working with a network of makerspaces that're called the Idea Labs. They've been really wonderful to work with. I first connected with them when they came here to Boulder, Colorado five years ago. It's been a really wonderful collaboration.

When I was working with families, I initially started working with Computer Clubhouses in the Boston area, and they were in, typically, Boys & Girls clubs—so it's even in the name [*laughs*] they're meant for boys and girls, not necessarily for parents or whole families. And so, while we would have this awesome experience for a series of workshops with the families, and our research to dig into the things that the experiences that families get out of it, it felt disappointing to have this amazing experience and not be able to point them to additional things that they could do as a family in this space.

When I came here to Colorado, I really wanted to connect with libraries because of that lifelong learning mission that many libraries have and the commitment to intergenerational learning and seeing themselves not just as a space, but really as a network of other organizations and partnerships and opportunities. I really was inspired by that, and I wanted to work with a library partner who was also interested in engaging families in creative learning experiences, but also tying it to opportunities that they could continue forward as a family or, as individuals—but that it didn't stop there: they could continue these relationships beyond the family creative learning experience.

Michelle: Part of thinking about that continuation is that once you have people of all ages learning alongside each other that line between learner and facilitator starts to blur so I wonder, do you have in your mind: what is the difference between a learner and facilitator? Are there any special duties that a facilitator has in the room of a workshop that's different than what a learner has as they're there?

Ricarose: I'm such a big proponent in saying that facilitators are learners as well. But just to start with some of the differences: I do think facilitators have this responsibility to design and support an experience for the participants. The work of facilitators starts before that engagement, you know: the planning, the relationship-building, how they communicate about the experience, the iterative design that goes into the space, for the materials or the activity structure.

But in my mind those are also learning experiences for the facilitator—all those steps and interactions are opportunities for facilitators to grow and develop their practice. And then, when they interact with participants in whatever—whether it's the space or a structured activity—facilitators are continuing to learn. They might try out a new practice, focusing on building relationships. Or they might focus on documenting the experience. There's so much to learn when they directly engage with participants and the other learners or other facilitators. Then there's the work afterwards: the reflection, the iteration, the thinking of next steps. I think those are all learning experiences. I'd say — from a participant standpoint — the facilitator does have that responsibility, but I see the responsibilities and the steps a facilitator takes, that those are all learning experiences.

Michelle: This reminds me of something that you close a paper that you wrote with Rupal Jain, where you say it's important to "facilitate the facilitators." Is this what you meant by that or is it something else?

Ricarose: When I talk to different partners of an organization—sometimes they're even on my own

team—there's this phrase that comes out: "training the facilitators."I cringe when I hear it because it feels so one-way. It's like "we need to treat the facilitator as this empty vessel that we fill in with expert knowledge" That's such the opposite of what we want to do with learners in the space. Like we don't see them as empty vessels. Just like learners have values and cultural practices and interests that they come in with, facilitators are the same way as well: they have backgrounds and interests and cultural practices that they come into being a facilitator. It's important to respect that as well. For those who work with facilitators or support new facilitators, it's important to see them as people who are learning.

When we shift away from "training" facilitators to "facilitating" facilitators, then we can have more of a relationship where we're learning from each other to design experiences for youth and families together rather than, "Here's the curriculum, you need to stand over here when we get to this part of the experience..."

In addition, I think many creative learning experiences have this aspiration for side-by-side learning, that the facilitator isn't this authority. One of the ways to really shift that dynamic towards more side-by-side learning is seeing the facilitators as learners.

One of the things I love to do in the Family Creative Learning program is actually recruit people of different backgrounds. There's this temptation like, "Oh, this is a STEM learning experience. We should recruit STEM experts to be facilitators!" but we miss a lot of what is needed in a learning experience. There's more to STEM than the disciplinary knowledge. There's, again, the relationship-building that happens in learning. There's ways to connect STEM to other disciplines that matter to youth—like art or music or sports. Facilitators have a lot of that knowledge, and when you have a diverse facilitation team, you can build on each other's strengths to design experiences together.

Michelle: It's really a lot about mindset. We've shared with the learners in our course on Facilitating Creative Learning a lot of different ways of thinking about how to position yourself and frame how you operate in the room. In this final week, we're going to be creating what we're calling "Facilitation Mantras": they're lists of reminders, notes to self, that our new facilitators—or even those of us who have been doing facilitation for a long time—can kind of recite as they get into a facilitator mindset.

I'm curious if there's any kind of ritual that you have before you run any creative learning workshop.

Ricarose: What I think about it, even just one word I try to engage with JOY. And I think about what joy means to me and what it means to feel joy in this space and I think

about things that bring me joy. I just kind of want to bring myself into a space of joy right before an experience.

Michelle: Is there anything else you do as a practice, before, during, or after the workshop?

Ricarose: We do. I am a fan of rituals, actually, and rituals, in the sense of—versus routine, I think rituals hold a lot of meaning and help us make sense of things.

Before we work together as a facilitation team, one of the things I encourage facilitators to do is to choose something from our *Facilitating Fundamentals* and reflect on one that you'd like to practice in this session that we're about to do. Rather than trying to feel like you have to master all of them at once. I don't think there is a sense of mastery, and, really, you're constantly trying it out in different ways in these situations with different people.

For example, "building relationships" looks really different in activities. Sometimes "building relationships", if it's a starter activity, you might focus more on welcoming someone, helping them engage with a new set of tools. Or "building relationships" might look different if it's a repeated engagement, you might ask them about something you talked about last week. Or "building relationships" looks different if one of the goals is to connect them to new opportunities, so you want to bridge—connect them to relationships that you have beyond this experience. So that's something I encourage our facilitators to do: choose the *Facilitating Fundamental*, and try to focus on that in your practice in the session.

During the experience I ask facilitators to pay attention to how this looks in practice. **Whether it's— you might** document in the photo or a quick note that you might write in your notebook.

Then, *after* the experience, we like to do reflection tool called "Red-Yellow-Green" where we think about what worked well, which is a green; yellow is what questions they have, and red is: what were areas that were challenging? I like to use the Red-Yellow-Greens to talk about participants' experiences, but also to invite facilitators to reflect on what it was like to to try out or focus on *this* practice in *that* engagement.

Michelle: The focusing on a facilitation technique is how we got to thinking about mantras. We have seven facilitation techniques for PLIX and then we've collected a number of other samples from you, and from The Tinkering Studio at the Exploratorium, and so many other lists of advice, but, as you say, it is really overwhelming to keep those all in mind, so I love this idea of focusing on one. With the mantra we were going to ask people to choose three to work on over time, but even just one is more than enough to challenge yourself during a

workshop—use as a lens for your interactions, so that's a great idea.

Michelle: Finally, Ricarose. You're our last guest of these conversation starters: any final words of advice to our library professionals, as they continue on this journey of deepening their understanding and practice as creative learning facilitators.

Ricarose: One thing I ask our facilitation team members at the end of a Family Creative Learning experience after we do our last Red-Yellow-Green is I ask them, "What did you learn?" or "What did you learn about yourself through this experience?" And I think it's an ongoing question to continue asking yourself. It's not just something to ask at the end of a particular milestone. What I love about asking that question to members of the facilitation team is that it again reminds them that they're learners in this, and there's something so precious about hearing each person share what they learned. It reveals—it reinforces that the rest of us are also learners that there's still—even I—I also contribute what I learned, and I learn something every time.

Something I would encourage, because you're just in this engagement together, is how to stay in touch to share what you learn. Because, in addition to sharing it with yourself, there's something powerful about saying it to others and hearing the ways that other people are learning. To share in that practice and to share your vulnerabilities and your questions and the ways that you want to work.

For me personally, something I continue to work on is how equity looks like in these kinds of experiences. How to articulate that and be explicit about it so that we can both understand what we're doing well, but also the ways that we can continue to improve. Equity is this moving target, and I find it hard to reflect on that by myself, so I'm really glad that I have students and collaborators and partners where we can reflect on that together.

Michelle: Well, those are great words to end on! You did not know that I would deeply appreciate this, but you have offered a plug for our PLIX forum, which is our community of practice! I hope this conversation can continue there, thank you for inadvertently pointing people in that direction, Ricarose! So once again thank you so much for taking the time to chat with us and get this final week of conversations started, and we look forward to continuing to work with you.

Ricarose: Thank you so much for having me ...and good luck with each of your facilitation journeys!

Note: This transcript has been edited slightly from the audio. Some pause words have been deleted for clarity.