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Theoretical Foundations and Experience of One Moscow and Four All-Russian Creative Web-based Contests

Vladimir A. Fomichov
Moscow Aviation Institute
(National Research University)

Olga S. Fomichova
Center of Social Competences "Dialogue of Sciences",
State Budget Professional Educational Institution "Sparrow Hills",
Moscow, Russia

Introduction

During the last decade it has been broadly realized that education in a knowledgeable society (or smart society) is to pay particular attention to supporting and developing in learners the significant, independent skills called soft skills (Soft skills, 2019; Buselic 2019) or transversal skills (Transversal skills, 2019; Bottino, Chiocciariello, Freina, and Travella 2019), including analytical and critical thinking, creativity, out-of-the-box thinking, and thinking and acting in terms of the public good. The significance of creativity perceived by the world's leading experts has been quickly increasing. In 2016 (Gray 2016), the experts of the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, Switzerland published the list of top 10 skills for the year 2015 and a forecast of the similar list for the year 2020. It is sufficient to say that the position of creativity shifted from No. 10 in 2015 to No. 3 in 2020. The forecast of the WEF list for 2020 includes also new skills in comparison with the WEF list 2015: emotional intelligence (No. 6) and cognitive flexibility (No. 10).

Since 2017, we have found and successfully implemented two original ways of using modern information and communication technologies for developing a broad spectrum of soft skills in children and adolescents.

One of the significant social problems in modern Russia is that the most gifted and highly motivated students in high schools enter the leading universities in the biggest cities of the country (mainly, in Moscow and Saint-Petersburg), receive an excellent education and never return to their native towns and villages. A portion of them find jobs abroad. Consequently, the population of middle and small towns is diminishing.

In the beginning of 2017, we launched an all-Russian Web-based creative contest for school children entitled "Portrait of Your Town"; it took place for the fourth time in January through June 2020. It is a delectable opportunity for children from 14 to 18 years to tell about the beauty and peculiarity of their town, about living in the town, understanding their roots, perceiving themselves as links in the chain of generations, to have a sophisticated look at their world and to take a personal look at the outstanding or usually unnoticed facets of their town—such facets without which, according to their opinion, the complete portrait of the country cannot be formed. The technical support (Web-platform) was provided to our school-contest by the Association of Living Cities, supported by the Public Chamber of the Russian Parliament.

The brightest and most beautiful thoughts from the compositions of the winners of the contests in 2017 and 2018 were presented at the first and second exhibitions, entitled "The Country as an Orchestra" (March 2018 and May 2019) in the Federation Council of the Russian Federation (RF)—the upper chamber of the RF Parliament (called "State Douma"). The authors were awarded the Letter of Gratitude signed by a senator (a member of the RF Federation Council).

In the beginning of 2019, a new track, "Say Thank You" and a new competition, "World, Nature, Universe's Essence" (a line taken from the poem "When It Clears Up" by Boris Pasternak), were included in the "Portrait of Your

Town" contest. The range of ages was expanded from 6 years to 18 years. The participants were to research which people from their native towns made a difference in their lives, who influenced them in their choice of future occupation, and who had been the behavior model the contestants would like to emulate.

The participants in "Say Thank You" submitted essays explicating their feelings of gratitude to such people. Our first working hypothesis was that this track would be able to contribute to developing in young people the sense of belonging to their native towns. Then, after receiving an academic degree in a university, a part of young specialists will return to their native region or will regularly do something useful for their region.

The contest "Portrait of Your Town" had a provision for four written lectures posted on the Web. These lectures were prepared by Olga S. Fomichova, one of the authors of this paper and are oriented toward the adult specialists (from a school or a library) who help children to prepare essays for the contest. Interaction with an adult seems to help contestants better explicate their feelings.

Our second working hypothesis was that the school-contest "Portrait of Your Town" and the "Say Thank You" track would contribute not only to developing a sense of belonging but also to supporting and developing a number of significant soft skills.

The analysis of the student essays shows that the contest supports and improves the emotional intelligence of the participants and develops such significant transversals (or soft skills) as analytical thinking, critical thinking, figurative thinking, creativity, out-of-the-box thinking, and the ability to think and act in terms of public good. The first track "Say Thank You" (February through June 2019) attracted participants from 18 subjects (similar to states or provinces) of the Russian Federation, including subjects in Siberia, and the North and the South of the country.

In March 2020, we had to urgently transform the 11th Moscow creative contest "Your World" into a completely Web-based form due to the coronavirus

pandemic. We asked participants to submit via e-mail their video presentations and essays describing what troubled them and what interested them. The next section describes the educational objectives of this contest and our original approach to producing and distributing expanded feedback to the participants.

Transformation of the creative Moscow contest “Your World” in the situation of self-isolation

Children and especially adolescents have numerous questions about themselves, about their own abilities, about their choices in the life, etc. They address these questions mainly to themselves. However, the problem is that they rarely receive answers to such questions.

The creative Moscow contest “Your World” is an answer to the necessity (formulated by society) to enhance attention to the inner world of the child and the adolescent, and to his/her spiritual development.

Children submit a metaphoric representation of their inner world, the way they experience it, the questions addressed to themselves about themselves or about their lives. They describe their feelings, their thoughts, their hobbies. Children represent their world’s vision in the form of an image, metaphor, sometimes as a musical composition (their own or another person’s), a poem (the own or another person’s), a dance, a fragment from a book, a picture (the own or another person’s), a story about their creative work (a study in a certain field), a song (their own or another person’s), a philosophical speculation, an image by means of which the child wants to create something. Using this material, the child creates a representation of his/her inner world, the system of moral values, and a troubling problem. The presentation is prepared with a teacher or/and a parent or parents.

Answering the questions of the referees (and one of us served on the referee board), the child had the possibility of clarifying something important for himself or herself, to understand the next step, to understand his or her way of thinking, and the possibility of taking an interesting look at whatever was significant to him or her.

The referee board of the contest evaluated the metaphoric representation and the way the participant found a correspondence between the metaphoric representation and his/her comments, and the explanation of why that metaphoric representation corresponded to the contestant's way of viewing the world.

Our eleven-year experience with this contest has shown that "Your World" develops several significant soft skills, including:

Analytical and critical thinking. Participants in the contest analyze their interests, hobbies, and questions they want to answer, and the problems they have considered in order to give a metaphor of their inner worlds (of thoughts, feelings, and imagination).

As a result, the motivation of the participants increases, because they research for their own benefits. Participation in the contest helps clarify oneself to oneself, helps distinguish oneself.

Let's consider a letter of gratitude (in an abridged form) received by the referee board of the contest "Your World". We will call the author Eugenia, which is not her real name. She is 12 years old.

"This contest is interesting, because, while working, a participant is rethinking her situation, is thinking over it, remembering that once you believed that it would last forever or, at least, for a long time. You are experiencing again the emotions flowed over you some time in the past, as a wave on the shore of the sea. Coming back and thinking over yourself in the past captures you. This contest is important for me, because I remembered my errors, analyzed them and now try not to repeat them. It is also important for finding my place in my studies or/and in my hobbies.

I would like to sum up that I like very much this contest and would like to participate in it next year”.

Out-of-the-box thinking. While discussing the subject of their talks with the referee board of the contest, participants listen to different points of view and different approaches to what they present. The participants see many aspects (facets) of the point under discussion, listen to references to poems, novels, paintings, music, hear the life experiences of well-known scientists, examine scientific research in various fields that help them to find new ways of viewing the point they are discussing (presenting). These activities lead to improving out-of-the-box thinking of the speakers and makes their mental outlook broader.

Creativity, logical thinking, and problem-solving skills. We believe humanity is based on curiosity. Children and teenagers like sharing their ideas with the others and need appreciation from them. If they have some beliefs and dreams, the referee board encourages them to think that their dreams are possible.

Overcoming a gap between generations. The contest helps to bridge the gap between generations. Children and teenagers experience interaction with adults who are interested in the subject under discussion. In this interaction, the opinion of children and teenagers prevails, because their ideas are the point of the discussion.

The 11th creative contest “Your World” was scheduled for March 23rd through the 27th, 2020. However, one week before, due to the coronavirus pandemic, elementary, middle, high schools, and universities in Moscow had to rely on distance education for lectures and lessons. The organizers of the contest encountered the highly complicated problem of transforming this contest into distance education format.

The first part of the proposed solution to this problem is as follows: the participants were asked to submit video presentations and essays, and all creative works via e-mail. This was successful.

Then it was necessary to take the second step: to find a way of formulating an estimation of the submitted work and the constructive individual recommendations for personal development. An extraordinary circumstance was that the Mayor of Moscow announced the transition to self-isolation and distance work in the next week (March 30th – April 5th). This is why it was possible to schedule the meetings of the referee board in the educational centre Dialogue of Sciences only for March 23rd – March 26th. At the meeting, the referees could (a) formulate the estimations and recommendations for each of the submitted 164 works, (b) to forward them via e-mail to the participants.

This highly challenging task was solved in three days, but this work demanded the intellectual and physical stress of the contest's referees, who worked from 9 A.M. until 7 P.M. on March 23rd, 24th, and 25th without lunches and coffee-breaks. The chair of the referee board (the second author of this paper) analyzed each piece of submitted material (a video presentation with comments) and formulated textual feedbacks (an estimation and a recommendation for personality development). Two colleagues transformed these textual feedbacks into electronic form and sent them via e-mail to the participants.

The feedback below shows the depth of the analysis, its individual character, and its volume (the names of the authors of the works have been changed).

Feedback 1

“Mikhail, it is a serious study which shows your mature attitude about life and your understanding of the fact that only a person with a broad mental outlook is able to form in himself a most important skill, out-of-the-box thinking; it is impossible to be successful in knowledge society without this skill.

The experience of your work shows that it is necessary to always grasp the essence of what you want to understand and, maybe, to make a discovery. The ability to work persistently is a gift, according to the opinion of the poet Marina Tsvetaeva. It is important to possess this gift, to penetrate the essence of things,

and to have a broad mental outlook in order to accumulate life experience and to form the ability of non-standard thinking.”

Feedback 2

“Alex, a meeting with a thinking person, as you do know, is always a gift of life. Your poem is wonderful! Thanks to you for your sincerity and trust in the contest. Thinking about the future is very important, because it is a lighthouse for your ship in the open sea. But there are always starry skies above the sea.

Your attitude about the world has been born today, and additional facets have been added to your character just today (but not later), and the same applies to your ability to see the unusual in the usual and the usual in the unusual, to be able to wonder.

Your poem includes the lines “We’ll bestow them with miracles”, which means that it is impossible to allow anybody to destroy the concept of a miracle in your world’s inner picture. And a flower without a visible motive for somebody is a miracle that you created today, and a readiness and desire to make the miracles for others.

Your idea “to find and to produce my own truth” is, to my mind, the demand (as the painter Vasily Polenov said) “to clarify yourself for yourself”, it is the task for the whole of life! But you have posed this task just now!”

Retrospectively it is clear that the extraordinary situation with a coronavirus pandemic forced the organizers to transform the contest “Your World” into a Web-based contest. Every school has learning outcomes. In this case, it was that the participants were enriched by a deeper understanding of themselves and of the life trajectories that will follow.

We received numerous positive feedbacks about the realized distance form of the contest “Your World”. The positive estimation is especially clearly expressed in the following feedback from Polina:

“This year I participated for the second time in the contest “Your World” and every time I scoop something new from it. For instance, last year I drew attention to the problem that rapid pace prevents people from seeing the beauty in simple and, seemingly, not significant people or things. But it seems to me that it is necessary in every age to preserve the ability to sincerely, as children, delight. I showed how it is possible to do so in a video record submitted last year for the contest.

This year the format of the contest was considerably changed due to the new situation in the world caused by the coronavirus, and concretely, the contest was transformed into a distance format. For every social event, the transition to a distance format is a kind of the lack of warmth which emerges during a live contact. However, this objective barrier between the referee board and the participants of the contest in no way prevented me from feeling the same attention, understanding, the same warmth and support on the part of the referee board, the experience of meeting a deep thought and a delicate attitude and sincere interest in my inner world in accordance with the statute of the contest “Your World”. The description of the contest ideally corresponds to the reality, the statute adequately reflects the essence and depth of the contest”.

General information about the All-Russian creative school-contest “Portrait of Your Town” and its track “Say Thank You”

The statistical results of the third contest “Portrait of Your Town” (January through June 2019) are as follows: the participants are from 18 subjects of the RF, they live in 39 places, including 27 towns and 12 settlements in rural areas. Two hundred forty sketches became the winners of the contest, including 72 sketches from the new track “Say Thank You.”

The second exhibition “Country as An Orchestra” in the Federation Council of the RF Parliament consisted of 60 pictures containing the excerpts with the brightest ideas from the essays of the winners. Fifty-five participants received a letter of gratitude from a senator of the RF.

The analysis of the essays submitted to the track “Say Thank You” enabled us to construct an unexpectedly rich classification of the persons receiving a “Thank You” from the participants. This classification is as follows: 17% - friend; 15% - school teacher; 12% - mother; 10% - teacher of extra education; 10% - inspiring person; 7% - father; 7% - relatives; 7% - manager; 5% - grandmothers and grandfathers; 5% - unknown person; 3% - tutor; 2% - school employee. The constructed classification was used as a system of nominations.

Let’s consider several examples of home compositions:

Example of analytical thinking: An 8-year-old named Kate writes: "One autumn day my parents led me to a ballet school. Yana K. became my teacher. She seemed to me to be just, kind, and beautiful. She taught us well but rigorously. She wants everything to be okay in our lives and that is why we undertake efforts. I've realized that it is necessary to make much effort to achieve a result. I've realized that if one undertakes effort and works very hard, then the world and the people in this world will become better.

Thank you, my teacher, for evoking in me the belief that I will be able to cope with everything, and it means that I'll be able to do everything.

Example of empathy, mindfulness: A 11-year-old girl named Maria writes: One spring day a young man opened a door of his car, intending to drive away. Suddenly he noticed a young girl who was crying, because her cat was unable to climb down to her from the top of a high tree. The young man reached the top of the tree, grasped the cat, and returned to the girl with the cat. The young girl was happy.

Example of empathy, thinking and acting in terms of public good: An 8-year-old boy named Andrey writes: “I would like to say THANK YOU VERY

MUCH to my teacher Maria K. She is a very kind person and a person of ready sympathy. One autumn day we with my class took an excursion to the Kremlin. It was November, and it was cold. I lost my hat in school. At the moment when all the classmates were dressed and were waiting for me, I was looking for my hat, but all my effort failed. Then my classmates started to help me look for my hat, but we failed to find it. Then our teacher gave me her hat and went on excursion without a hat. Everything was good, we successfully went on an excursion, and nobody among us became ill.”

Realization of a new fundamental approach to up-bringing

Since the year 2019, the contest “Portrait of Your Town” included a section entitled “World, Nature, and the Universe’s Essence.” The rationale for introducing this section was grounded in the idea that the broad prospects of developing the personality of children and adolescents are not entirely understood, not used by modern education as a whole, but are opened by systematic (starting in early childhood) establishment of a correspondence between the situations observed in nature and everyday situations.

Today children throughout the world study nature from the standpoints of botany, biology, geography, chemistry, and physics. Our accumulated experience shows that this approach is too narrow, and does not include a complete understanding of nature, of grasping the whole spectrum of knowledge about the world and about the behavior of a person in the world of people, a philosophy encoded in the phenomena of nature.

Outstanding poets, writers, and painters give numerous examples of decoding deep meanings in nature’s phenomena, expressing these deep meanings by means of verbal and visual images comprehensible to human beings. We are convinced that it is possible and necessary to use the lessons of literature, poetry, and the

arts as a possibility of a dialogue between people and nature, while searching for the answers to acute questions during the period of the maturation of one's personality.

Conducting a dialogue of this kind creates cognitive preconditions of forming a principally new level of ecological consciousness when nature becomes a permanent partner able to listen and to give answers. This is the true meaning of the broadly known phrase "It is necessary to be able to read the book of nature." The most important result of forming this new level of ecological consciousness is the creation of strong inner restrictions concerning the human destruction of nature: one cannot destroy something in one's consciousness.

Analyzing the essays submitted to this section in the years 2019 and 2020, we concluded that the idea of nature-oriented behavior was broadly perceived by young children and teenagers as part of their conceptual world's picture.

Example 1 (from Alexandra E.). *"Let's consider the emergence of the leaves on the trees in spring and the shedding of leaves in autumn. I selected this phenomenon, because it is like the situation when people emerge in our life: some time they are close to you and then, in autumn, their interest in you fades, your relations are fading, and such people lose the connection with you, just as the leaves during the shedding. Only those people stay near you, who interlock with the tree and are fading together with it".*

Example 2 (from Ilya K.). *"A leaf from a tree fell in the water of a river, the river grasped it and carried away. Maybe, it will stop on the beach of the river, but maybe it will take on weight and sink. The same situation can be observed in life. If a person has no own opinion, that person will "flow" across life, achieving nothing. It is necessary to have one's own opinion."*

Taking the above statements into account, we suggest a new fundamental approach to upbringing of young children and adolescents (considering that the upbringing is directed socialization): to systematically establish the parallels between the phenomenon of nature and social agreements, life situations.

The contest “Portrait of Your Town” and “Your World” as the third implementation of a self-oriented learning model

One interpretation of the contests “Portrait of Your Town” and “Your World” in the context of modern educational theory is to recognize that during the last decade, the peculiarities of our society have created the need for a new paradigm of the educational process. One of the most significant peculiarities is the necessity of changing a profession several times during the working period of life.

Proceeding from the broadly accepted role of emotional intelligence (EI) in professional and personal life, we suggested a new learning model (LM) called the Student Self-Oriented LM (SSOL model). It is defined as the model beneficial for self-cognition and self-construction through the prism of the acquired knowledge and life experience (Fomichov and Fomichova 2017-2019).

The scientific literature describes two successful implementations of the SSOL model. The first one is the System of Emotional-Imaginative Teaching (the EIT-system), based on the Theory of Dynamic Conceptual Mappings (the DCM-theory). The EIT-system is aimed at systematic development of EI, reasoning skills, sound creativity, figurative thinking, language skills, and communication of culture with lessons in language, including the mother tongue and SL, literature, and poetry in two languages (for example of Russian and English), the symbolic languages of painting, sculpture, garden-park art, and classical dance. We have accumulated the 30-year-long successful experience of using the EIT-system in extra education in Moscow, Russia. Many aspects of the DCM-theory and the EIT-system are described, in particular, in (Fomichov and Fomichova 1994-2019; Fomichov 2015; Fomichova and Fomichov 1996-2019).

The DCM-theory and the EIT-system belong to the constructive core of cognitronics, or the science of the human being in the digital world (Fomichov and Fomichova 2006-2019; Fomichova and Fomichov 2009-2019). We organized and co-chaired six international conferences on cognitronics in conjunction with the international scientific multiconferences on “The Information Society” (Slovenia, Ljubljana, Jozef Stefan Institute, October 2009, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2019, see https://is.ijs.si/?page_id=903). In total, researchers from 25 countries participated with papers in six conferences on cognitronics.

The ideas and methods of cognitronics underpinned educational projects in several countries including Croatia and Macedonia (Panev, Pogarcic, and Gjergjeska 2017), Croatia (Panev 2019), the UK (Kane 2014, 2017) and Mexico, the UK and PR China (Craig, Roa-Seiler, Martínez Diaz, and Lara Rosano 2014).

In 2019, we formulated the following expanded definition of cognitronics: it is the science of the trajectories of human beings to such a level of intellectual and spiritual height that the scale of his or her personality becomes proportional to the scale of the digital world.

The second successful implementation of the SSOL-model is Art Cognitronics (AC) (Fomichov and Fomichova 2014, 2015, 2018, 2019). AC is one of the principal branches of cognitronics. AC aims at tuning the EI of the young children and adolescents with the help of well-known works of art. The goal is to create a bright semantic trace in the world’s conceptual picture of the learner corresponding to explaining or illustrating a moral value, communicative situation, deciding the cognitive process itself, the process of self-cognition and consideration, the seething cocktail of emotions, a way of viewing the world, etc.

AC establishes the links between objects, situations, processes, views of a person (a beholder) and the work of art that becomes a metaphor or a vivid illustration (vivid mental representation) of something the beholder is considering. That is why the consciousness of the beholder develops the ability

to establish diverse analogies and consequently is able to take a new look at a situation.

Example. For enriching the colour of their canvases, the impressionists made use of what is known as division of colour and optical blending, e.g., to represent a green meadow, they put little dabs of blue and yellow on the canvas that combine to form green in the eye of the beholder – a far more intense green than one taken straight from the artist’s palette. That is why it is impossible to understand the idea of an impressionist painting by standing close to the canvas. We have to step back and look at it from a certain distance to enjoy it and to receive the desired effect.

The same situation exists in every-day life: multiple dabs and reflections prevent us from grasping the sense of what is happening. As in case with impressionists’ canvases, we have to look at the situation from a distance, and distance in this case is time. We need some time to better understand what happened, and this will help us to cope with the situation.

The following principal factors provide the possibility to interpret the all-Russian creative contest “Portrait of Your Town” as the third implementation of the SSOL model of educational process. The main idea underpinning the creation of the SSOL model was, while interacting with the learners, to take into account and to improve their emotional intelligence.

We indicate a spectrum of the themes’ facets but not the theme itself. The children and adolescents participating in the main track of the contest are to ask the questions about the existence in their towns of such precious peculiarities that the portrait of the whole country would be incomplete without describing these peculiarities. Participants in the track “Say Thank You” are asked whether there are such people in her/his surroundings that interaction with them turned out to be a defining experience for the participant. Children discover the delighting traits of character, the manner of speech, the ability to attentively listen to for a long time, etc.

After having been delighted, a child or an adolescent is to critically have a look inside herself/himself and ask herself/himself whether she/he possesses the traits of the character who delighted her/him and whether she/he wants to improve her/his character. The participants in the track receive the possibility to understand and to appreciate what they do know. We create a thought-provoking situation which stimulates children and adolescents to analyze facts, to think over, to develop critical thinking (when a schoolgirl or boy understands that she/he doesn't possess an attractive character trait). The similar considerations apply to the contest "Your World". The transfer of an experience from one situation to another situation contributes in many cases to developing *cognitive flexibility*.

Goodnet: the growth of self-estimation in people of usual, mass professions

In every country, a great majority of people pursue professions that don't attract public attention. This applies to schoolteachers, hospital workers, nurses, bus drivers, postmen, and even gardeners. Such people usually believe that nothing in the country depends on them.

The victory of a schoolgirl or boy in the "Say Thank You" track becomes a thought-provoking event in a small settlement or town. In many cases, the local newspaper publishes news about both the child and the adult who is the hero of the child's sketch.

As a result, many people in the country in mass professions have realized that they are able to make a difference for somebody at their workplace. They become to be known in a small town or a village or in a district of a city. Therefore, the positive self-assessment of these people increases. Children formulate new values; as a result, a new category of significant and distinguished people emerges.

Example (conciierge): A 6-year-old named Vika writes: "It is monsieur Dima. He is a conciierge in our home. A conciierge is a man who defends us from bad people. Monsieur Dima is very kind. When I enter the home, I see him, and immediately my spirits are getting bright. Sometimes we are speaking, and sometimes he puts me on his shoulders and delivers me to the elevator, and I am laughing. Monsieur Dima acts in this way because he is kindhearted. Thank you, monsieur Dima, because you are kind and good".

The "Say Thank You" track has shown the significance for children and adolescents of the notion "a hero of our time". Simple people thinking and acting in terms of the public good become such heroes.

The significance of the track can be better grasped when we compare it with the World Wide Web. The great peculiarity of the Web is that it reaches every family, every person who is not extremely young. The "Say Thank You" track can be interpreted as *a digital platform for explicating estimation and distributing good*. Then the track can be called *GoodNet* - it reaches every family, connects the generations and elicits a response in every heart. "Say Thank You" is a platform where the demand, significance, and reality of a respectable attitude toward others bridges the gap between generations, explicates and enhances intrinsic interest towards other people.

Conclusion

The analysis of the essays written by the winners of the All-Russian creative Web-based school contest "Portrait of Your Town" and the Moscow Web-based school contest "Your World" shows that they support and improve emotional intelligence of the participants, analytical and critical thinking, creativity, figurative thinking, out-of-the-box thinking, and the ability to think and act in terms of the public good. We believe that the participation in the school contests

“Portrait of Your Town” several times during school years will improve the sense of belonging to a native town, and it will contribute to increasing the proportion of the young specialists returning to native towns or native regions after receiving higher education.

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