

# Creativity in the Classroom: Igniting the Fire

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**B**eware! What follows is a call for a radically new approach to how we engage our students in the classroom and assist them in the process of becoming lifelong learners and critical thinkers. It is my attempt to sway you to the importance of including a dangerous type of pedagogy that encourages students to think and learn in divergent ways, rather than neatly and uniformly as you and I were probably taught. What follows is a “call to arms,” of sorts, to find ways of infusing a bit of creativity into our classrooms that may very well revolutionize the way we approach our teaching and our students.

Okay, perhaps this creativity thing isn’t such a “radically” new approach to teaching or engaging our students, and it probably won’t “revolutionize” the way most of us approach our classrooms. It is, however, an approach that I fear is too often avoided or minimized in many traditional classroom settings. One fact, though, simply cannot be overstated. Today’s classrooms are some of the most diverse and challenging learning environments that higher education has known. Greater numbers of students are entering college than ever before, bringing with them an array of learning styles and backgrounds that may or may not respond well to the traditional lecture on which many of us cut our academic teeth. What’s more, once these students leave the confines of our ivory towers, they will be moving into a world that has also become increasingly complex, diverse, and challenging, requiring that they possess a much more flexible and divergent set of cognitive skills than previous generations. Pedagogies that are enriched by creativity have the potential of offering us a way to reach this diverse array of students and fully engage them with the content- and knowledge-based skills that are the foundation of our field.

### What Does it Mean to be Creative?

Although a comprehensive discussion about the nature of creativity is far beyond the scope of this essay, suffice it to say that the nature of creativity has been amply described as something that is both novel and that has value. Furthermore, to be creative requires personal resources in at least six domains including intelligence, knowledge, thinking styles, personality, motivation, and a supportive environment (Sternberg & Lubart, 1995). The problem with such a definition is that it may give the sense that in order to be creative or to benefit from creativity, one must be strong in all six domains and be capable of producing an end-product that meets strict definitional standards. Unfortunately, such an understanding of creativity can sometimes lead us to hastily assume that thinking and behaving creatively is somehow out of our reach or beyond the grasp of many of our students.

## Enhancing Your Own Classroom Creativity

Although there are no step-by-step procedures that can ensure your creative success in the classroom, there are a few practices that are generally recognized as essential to becoming more creative, regardless of the context or your prior creative abilities. First and foremost is the commitment we must make to become more creative. Improving our creative abilities will not happen overnight and will likely require a great deal of patience and persistence in the face of possible flops and disappointments.

Another critical element to improving our creative abilities is practicing what Ramocki (2007) and others refer to as high-road transfers, or the application or abstraction of concepts or principles from one field or context to a completely different field or context. For instance, you might discuss Kohlberg's theory of moral development within a broader context of global politics and how each of the six stages described by Kohlberg are reflected in the charter of the United Nations. Maybe you then have students write their own charter in a way that reflects each of Kohlberg's six stages of moral development. Regardless of the topic or activity you choose, the point is that you are demonstrating for your students a moderately high-road transfer of a developmental psychology theory to a seemingly unrelated topic such as global politics.

We must also become more diligent about capturing our ideas as they emerge, regardless of how good or creative they might seem at first. Keep a pad of paper nearby in your desk or at home and be prepared to write down any ideas or words that come to you. Then, make it a point to revisit these ideas at least once a week, revising and pruning as new ideas emerge and old ideas evolve. Make a pledge to yourself to try one of these new ideas each week or every other week.

Make it a point to also try on new perspectives. For instance, try adopting the perspective of a colleague from a different discipline when you plan a lesson, particularly when considering controversial or ambiguous problems that might arise from the material. Imagine yourself teaching the material from this new perspective. How might your lectures and discussions be different? Better yet, try teaching from a new perspective in a new classroom with which you're unfamiliar. Making these shifts will force you out of your comfort zone and require that you also become more conscious of the prior assumptions that you embrace based on your own expertise or previous experience with the material. Quite often, adopting a new perspective like this can breathe fresh life into the topics on which we have become too focused or contented.

Finally, become comfortable with the idea of taking risks in the classroom. Don't be afraid to try out the new activities that emerge from the ideas you capture, regardless of your level of skill or that of your students. Be open to learning alongside your students (as much as from your students) during activities where your level of expertise might not be high. Be prepared to let go of the reins a little and allow your students some creative license in how your class time is structured. Challenge your students to come up with their own creative ways to present course material. Most importantly, be prepared at all times to reflect on your teaching and the learning that occurred, always looking for new ideas that emerge from what might be unexpected sources.

## A Few Examples

I recently decided to take my general psychology class to our campus art gallery for the lesson on neuroscience, which is a topic that often intimidates a fair number of students. After discussing some of the basics and providing a quick review/overview of the brain, I simply asked each student to select a piece of artwork in the gallery and imagine him/herself as the “conductor” inside the artist’s mind as that artist was creating the piece. What would they need to tell each structure to do in order to allow the artist to “create?” How would each structure contribute to the process? How might the artwork appear different if something went wrong with a particular structure? While my students were busy answering these questions, I was also completing the activity, sharing responses with my students as we went along. By anchoring our topic to one that students find less intimidating and even enjoyable, this activity helped my students approach a topic that they might have previously felt was unapproachable. This activity also allowed me to model the types of flexible thinking and interdisciplinary connections that I want my students to see for themselves.

As another example, I routinely make use of an assignment in which students in my general psychology course select terms from our textbook and create an analogy or metaphor using those terms. I urge students to choose ideas that they find confusing or are struggling with in some way. Students are told that the emphasis in grading this assignment will not be placed on the actual analogy or metaphor itself, but rather on their explanation that accompanies each. My goal with this assignment is to encourage students to exercise their divergent thinking skills and look for ways to meaningfully connect terms from our course to their own outside interests or backgrounds.

Finally, I’ve asked students in my abnormal psychology course to create an artistic representation of a psychological disorder of their choosing by adopting the perspective of someone who has that disorder. Once they feel they have adequately adopted the perspective of their subject, they then create something (anything!) from that person’s perspective that conveys what the student believes to be the essence of their disorder. Again, the grading emphasis is not placed on the creative work, per se, but rather on the accompanying back-story in which students are asked to reflect on their experience of adopting the perspective they chose and the process by which they created their work. Student products have ranged from poems and monologues to portraits and three-dimensional models. One of the benefits of this assignment is that my students have engaged the material in a way that would not be possible through traditional lectures or discussions or by having students write a standard research paper on one of these illnesses. It also teaches them the importance and value of examining issues from multiple points of view.

## The Challenges and Benefits of Incorporating Creativity in the Classroom

To be certain, introducing a pedagogy of creativity into our classrooms is not without its challenges. For starters, we must be able to overcome the false notion that creativity is akin to a sudden flash of insight or that it is some rare commodity possessed by only a few lucky individuals. In fact, creative ideas require work and have often undergone significant changes and revisions before eventually maturing into their final products. Likewise, what people often tend to lack is not creativity, per se, but rather the initiative or appropriate motivation to pursue an idea and see that idea through to its completion. To be creative in the classroom requires that we first set aside these all-or-nothing assumptions about creativity and recognize that

creativity is something that must be learned and developed over time. Being creative in the classroom also requires that we not be so quick to dismiss ideas, whether our own or our students'. Rather, we must be willing to work with these ideas for a while to see where they lead us.

We must also overcome our own fear of letting go of the reins, so to speak, and trust that the risks we take will be rewarded when our students are allowed a little creative license. There is no doubt that such acts of rebellion can sometimes be anxiety provoking, even for the best of educators. But like any risky venture, with success often comes a sense of exhilaration and renewal. Such risk taking (if sensible) in the face of uncertainty and ambiguity may also unwittingly model for our students those traits that will surely help them become better critical thinkers and more effective problem-solvers (Sternberg, 2003).

In addition to increasing students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills, we should expect to realize other benefits, too. When we teach more creatively, we encourage our students to become active rather than passive learners and to adopt a more intrinsic motivation for this learning to occur, both within and across disciplines (Conti, Amabile, & Pollak, 1995). In fact, Dowds (1998) argued that by facilitating student creativity in our classrooms, we help students reduce the tendency to compartmentalize discipline-specific knowledge and make broader connections between disciplines.

### Some Concluding Thoughts

Despite my premise at the beginning of this essay, infusing creativity into our teaching does not have to require a radical shift in how we approach the classroom. While it may require us to set aside certain preconceptions about our own creativity or that of our students, the minor risks involved in doing so can sometimes yield the greatest benefits to our students, as well as ourselves. Infusing creativity into our teaching fosters not only the critical thinking and problem-solving skills that we seek to build within our students, but can also increase their intrinsic motivation for learning, thus leading to greater long-term retention of content knowledge. Finally, when we teach creatively, we encourage our students to look beyond the content in search of broader and more meaningful connections, and foster a greater sense of engagement with not only the material itself, but also the world around them. Perhaps William Butler Yeats said it best when he wrote, "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire." Is creativity not the perfect match with which to light that fire?

### References

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## Note

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