

Valuing and Developing Students' Creativity

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Creativity and creative teaching are becoming part of the educational psyche but let's set the concept of creativity within some kind of context. The government is beginning to recognize that young people need to develop the creative skills that will be necessary in the workplace of the future. Fast-moving technology and the increasing demands for flexibility and imagination mean that all our students need to be able to pose questions such as 'what if...?', 'why...?' and 'why not?'

It is also more than likely that, as young people start their careers, they will move jobs several times and will need ability to cope with change so that they can produce creative solutions to increasingly complex environments. Creative teaching practices will help prepare them for this-promoting the ability to solve problems, think independently and work flexibly.

In *Expecting the Unexpected: Developing Creativity in Primary and Secondary Schools* (www.ofsted.gov.uk) the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) suggests that 'being creative' and 'creative teaching' are not radical or new concepts-all that they really involve is a willingness to observe, listen and work closely with students to help them develop their ideas in a purposeful way.

Ofsted goes on to suggest that it is vital that school leadership is committed to promote creativity because this support and encouragement will permit both students and teachers to work creatively and help to ensure that good practice is recognized, resourced properly and disseminated across the school. It identifies four characteristics of creativity in schools:

- thinking and behaving imaginatively
- imaginative activities take place in a purposeful way, i.e. related to a specific objective
- the activity generates something original
- There is value in the activity that is related to the original objective.

I think this is an interesting definition when it is applied to teaching and learning because it immediately removes any vague ideas that all creativity is about is lying on summer lawns thinking 'creative' thoughts that are never realized.

To be able to develop students' creativity we need to begin with a review of our own attitudes and beliefs and then come up with ideas and specific activities inspiring creativity; these may be complemented with ideas of other people (e.g. exchange ideas, talk to other teachers, go to workshops, read books).

1. Make sure students believe that they can indeed be creative.

- Tell students that everyone has the capacity to be creative, that creativity is a universal trait. Ask them to think about ways in which they have been showing their ability to be creative ever since they can remember. Have them talk about their drawings, poems, imagination, including the (lies)/stories they have been making up, the way they

play, the conversations they have with people in their heads, things they have built/constructed when playing, ideas they come up with.

- Work on raising students' self-esteem and their belief in themselves.
- Introduce activities proving to students beyond any doubt that their minds are different than other people's minds, that they are absolutely unique. Emphasis that there is nobody exactly like they are in the whole world that they are special and that everyone else is also special.

2. Create a relaxed environment in which students feel safe to take risks and get things 'wrong'.

Seriously review your own and students' attitudes to mistakes.

- Everybody, absolutely everybody, makes mistakes.
- In order to learn something we must make some mistakes.
- We need to anticipate making mistakes in whatever we do.
- It is important to learn from the mistakes we make. We frequently get things wrong many times, not just once!
- 'Mistakes' were sometimes responsible for unexpected scientific discoveries (e.g. penicillin).

Tell your students Thomas Edison's story:

When Thomas Edison was 7 years old, his teacher said he was too stupid to learn. And yet he became one of the most famous scientists and inventors! As Edison pursued inventing the light bulb, he tried more than 2,000 experiments before he got the electric bulb to work. A reporter asked him how it felt to fail so many times. Edison responded: 'I never failed

once. I invented the light bulb. It just happened to be a 2,000 step process.'

Adopt and consistently use constructive ways of responding to learners' mistakes and replace some of the unhelpful responses with more encouraging ones. Remember that the tone of your voice may be even more important than the words!

From time to time introduce in your class an error-free activity, i.e. an activity in which every answer is possible, every answer is 'correct'.

Introduce a light-hearted attitude to mistakes by making them acquainted with their 'Mistake Monsters'. This activity has proved many times to be very effective!

3. Make a habit of looking for 'another right answer'.

Change the way you ask questions and modify your expectations.

- Ask more questions to which there is evidently more than one correct answer; expect students to give two or three possible answer, solutions, and sentence or story endings.

- Once a question has been answered, say 'and now let's look for another possible answer. For example: $2+2=?$ How many answers are possible? (4, $3+1$, $10-6$, etc).

Even if nobody does find more answers, your question will stimulate their thinking and awaken an attitude of searching for more possibilities.

As often as it is appropriate use Edward de Bono's Plus Minus Interesting thinking exercise.

4. Encourage students to re-visit and reexamine the rules and, if appropriate, recommend changing them.

Discuss with students the reasons why they have rules as rules are everywhere; they govern every aspect of our lives. In your discussion talk about different kinds of rules: rules which protect people's life, safety, health, values, rights, comfort, etc.

Decide together which rules must stay, should stay, could stay and which may be changed or scrapped altogether.

Discuss the school rules with the School Council. Evaluate the rules, their effectiveness and find out whether students want to change or introduce different rules.

In art/music/dance lessons when talking about literature, encourage students to experiment with breaking rules, going against logic, contradicting accepted thinking and disregarding learnt skills.

5. Provoke creative breaking of accepted patterns.

Ask, What would happen if...? Questions in any lesson: (history, physics, psychology) no matter how whacky they appear to be. This way you can take students away from their routine thinking and exercise their 'creative muscle'.

Tell students to read a text-book, starting from the last chapter, or to read a chapter starting from the summary. Break the pattern yourself and run a lesson differently from the way you normally do.

The world's truly creative people were not necessarily conforming students. They were rebels, often pronounced un-teachable with no hope for future success. Just think about people as Edison, Albert Einstein, Ernest Hemingway, Bill Gates, Richard Branson, not to mention most famous artists! You may say that this is different for geniuses. These people were by no means seen as brilliant, rather as

delinquent, dump students when they were at school. It is their non-conformism, breaking the rules matched with determination, perseverance and ambition, which made them who they are: creative and successful people.

6. Find the right balance between teaching skills and inspiring creative expression.

Apart from teaching valuable skills, encourage students to express themselves through dance, music, art and language.

a) When teaching art provoke a new way of looking at things from a distance (draw an object as if seen under the microscope and 500 meter away):

- in an unrealistic colour;
- through a distortion of shape;
- by humanization things (furniture);
- from a perspective (from birds-eye view, from under the object).

b) When teaching music, make music their language:

- have students improvising a song to a poem (of their own?);

- encourage them to play improvised musical dialogues;

- make improvisation 'fun', show students that it is OK to play with sound in a silly way; this will melt away the resistance and embarrassment many students may feel.

c) When teaching dance:

- have students create their own dance routines;

- encourage students to improve on a regular basis and develop sensitivity to the music they are dancing to;

- inspire students to choose their own music and improvise a dance which becomes one with the music;

- encourage students to tell a story through a dance.

d) When teaching writing:

- encourage students to express their imagination, their dreams, their feelings and their thoughts through poems, stories, plays.

7. Teach students how to suspend all judgment.

● Introduce no-evaluative activities as often as you can – allow freedom of expression and appreciate students' imagination. Have students thinking about solving a problem and tell them that all crazy ideas are welcome; the crazier the better!

● Evaluating ideas comes as the step. Allow the slow thinking, dreamy, playful mind the time it needs to brew new ideas.

● Mention a problem, a task or a need for action before the weekend, leaving the seeds to germinate in students' minds. Remind them about it a few days later and once again leave it for a while. Some time tell students to put on their creative hats and come up with ideas as to what could be done. All ideas, including the most outrageous, are welcome!

● Encourage students to find their best 'creative spot', be it physical or imaginary. Ask them to draw or describe in writing, a place they find really good for coming up with creative ideas. Tell them they can always go to this place, it not physically then in their minds, whenever they want to think creatively.

Purposeful creativity

Obviously, this kind of daydreaming can be part of a creative process but- and this is a big but- creative people actually do something. They are purposeful. They have an objective-whether it is an

original recipe, a design for a bridge, a great painting or a beautiful poem. Sometimes-and this is possibly part of the generation gap-teachers and students' views about what is creative, in terms of being worthwhile and valuable, may differ. Many students may well feel that lying about 'thinking' about writing a poem is 'wickedly' original and creative. But most teachers and all those principals who are supporting creativity would argue that it involves action. Thinking about an imaginative idea and not doing anything about it is not being creative.

Creative schools are better schools

Creative needs to be a whole-school issue. The National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE) is amassing a considerable amount of data that suggests that the more engaged students are in creative activities, the better the behaviour and the higher their achievements.

Ofsted notes that in the 4 most effective schools:

- head teachers placed the development of creativity high on their list of priorities
- they were outward looking, welcoming and open to ideas from external agencies
- There were no radical new teaching methods but students' ideas were developed in a purposeful way.

The future of all current students rests on the wisdom of the decisions that they will make. A school where creativity is valued will be able to:

- provide an environment where students go beyond the expected and are rewarded for doing so
- help students find a personal relevance in learning activities

- create a stable and structured ethos for a successful curriculum but at the same time create alternatives in the way information is taught and shared
- encourage students to examine and explore alternative ways of doing things
- give them time for this kind of exploration.

The Reggio Emilia approach

The success of the Reggio Emilia approach to early year's education has influenced theory and practice in the area of creativity in primary education. In schools in Reggio Emilia there is an innovative staffing structure with each early years centre having an 'atelierista' (a specially trained art teacher) who works closely with the classroom teachers.

In Italy in the primary sector there is significant teacher autonomy with no national curriculum or associated achievement tests. In Reggio Emilia the teachers become skilled observers and they routinely divide responsibilities, so that one can teach the class. Teachers from several schools sometime work and learn together and this contributes to the culture of the teachers as learners.

The learning environment is crucial in the Reggio Emilia approach and classrooms often have courtyards, wall-sized windows and easy access to stimulating outdoor areas. Each classroom has large spaces for group activities and specially design areas for students and staff to interact. Display areas are large and stimulating and reflect the creativity of the students. Teachers in early years settings in Reggio often refer to the learning environment as a 'third teacher' as most centres are small with just two classroom teachers.

The curriculum is project-based and there are numerous opportunities for creative thinking and

exploration. The teachers work on topics with small groups of students while the rest of the class work on self-selected activities. Projects are often open-ended and therefore curriculum planning is flexible and is sometimes teacher-directed and sometimes child-initiate. This philosophy is inspiring and can be partially transferred to the different framework of our primary and secondary school.

Whole-school approach to developing 'creativity'

For school leaders the first step in developing a creative school is the fostering of a whole-school approach. Creativity is not an add-on and it cannot be imposed by the head teacher. There needs to be discussion, involvement and ownership. The debate should be based around some of the following points:

- taking control of the curriculum by the school
- the creation of a school with creativity at the heart of the learning process
- enhancing the motivation for staff and students
- fostering the professional development of all the staff, both teaching and non-teaching
- involving government (education) sector, community and parents in a whole-school approach to creativity and showing how this philosophy supports school improvement and high standards of achievement
- getting the students involved in school issues (regarding the curriculum and the learning, perhaps through the school council)

Teachers can promote creativity

If creativity is part of staff development programme they are more likely to be enthusiastic about it. One of the most important points to make is that creativity doesn't just arrive and settle in classrooms and become instantly successful. Teachers have to plan for it to happen. It might be possible for existing teaching styles, schemes of work and medium-and short term plans to be modified in some way so that there is more potential for creativity.

It might also be the case that teachers will have to modify their approach and promote a range of teaching and learning styles that will be allow many more students to demonstrate their creativity. This will only work, however, if students know their way around the subject that they are being creative about.

Creativity is the future

It is suggested that students who are encouraged to be creative and independent become more interested in discovering things, more open to new ideas, keener to explore them – even willing to work beyond lesson time to do so!

Schools that promote creativity will ensure that all their students respond positively to opportunities and responsibilities and are better able to cope with new challenges as well as change and adversity.

Creativity should be celebrated and the school should consider looking for outside accreditation. Creative successes should be carefully evaluated, highlighted and showcased to parents and the community. Staff should be empowered to design activities within the curriculum which are exciting, motivating and relevant to their school and students. Once these seeds are sown, creativity will flourish.

References

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