

Creativity: A Guide for the Advanced Learner (and Teacher)

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Adapted from an article in *National Association of Head Teachers' Leadership Papers*, 2003

There's an awful lot of nonsense talked about creativity, so we have to untangle it and get the 'nots' out of it before we can start teaching it.

Creativity is not grand: it is not just for budding Mozarts and Einsteins. It is what you need when your teenage daughter says it is 'so not fair' that she can't go to France with Kevin. It is what you need when a colleague has to change but won't.

Creativity is not particularly artistic, and you do not have to dress weirdly to do it. It is as vital for accountants and receptionists as it is for designers and song-writers.

Creativity is not necessarily a 'good thing'. A lot of very bad inventions have come from very creative people.

Creativity is not comfortable to be around: it is often anarchic and rebellious. Would you have wanted Tracey Emin, Graham Norton and Rik Mayall at the back of your class?

Creativity is not easy. It is not a matter of a few hints and tips and off we go. It is often slow and sometimes agonising.

Creativity is not wacky. It draws on and is constrained by a good deal of knowledge and experience. Anything does not go. Creativity seeks a solution to something that matters.

Creativity is not easy to assess: the products often demand new criteria of evaluation, and provoke fierce and inescapable argument about what is 'true art', or an 'elegant theory'.

Creativity does not have its own home in the brain: it is not camped in the right hemisphere, and it is not opposed to logic and analysis. Dancers think hard, just as much as scientists need to dream.

Creativity is not solitary. Typically periods of solitude and rumination are interspersed with intense engagement with the social and cultural world, be it a family discussion or a university seminar.

Creativity is not simply 'released', like a helium balloon when the anchoring weights of convention or criticism are untied. Yes, the mental and emotional brakes have to be off, but there is a great deal of learned skill and sensitivity to creativity, just as there is to flying a balloon.

And *creativity is not innate*. Genius may have a small genetic element to it, but everyday creativity is an acquired art.

Most importantly of all, *creativity is not one thing*. It is not a unitary faculty that can be trained or cultivated by itself. Creativity is an advanced form of learning that involved a finely tuned symphony orchestra of mental attitudes and capabilities playing together in complicated rhythms. Creativity is learning at its deepest and most powerful, and it builds on mastery of all the basic skills and habits of more familiar kinds of learning.

It follows that *creativity cannot be 'trained'* in any simple, mechanistic sense of the word. It can be cultivated, coached even, but it can't be engineered, let alone taught.

So, having cleared the ground, how can we conceive of creativity in a way that gives us a realistic chance of helping young people – all of them, not just the 'gifted and talented' – to become more creative? The first thing to do is to identify the main sections of the learning orchestra that contribute to creativity. There are eight such sections: the 'Eight Is of Learning'.

Learning through *immersion* involves steeping yourself in experience. Creative people are expert noticers: they know how to look long enough and deeply enough for crucial details and buried patterns to make themselves known. The key skill here is to be able to switch off the tendency to describe, label, analyse and think. Thinking shrinks the world into familiar categories, and leeches it of its creative richness.

The second I is *inquisitiveness*. To be creative you have to have a questioning disposition. You have to like questions and be able to tolerate the not-knowing that goes along with them. To train young people that everything can be neatly answered within an hour is to weaken what Keats called their 'negative capability': the ability to 'be in doubts, mysteries and uncertainties without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.' The chewing muscles of creativity develop only in the context of meaty problems. Students tend to engage most energetically with problems to which their teacher does not know the answer – what Harvard educationist David Perkins calls 'wild topics'.

The third I is *investigation*: the skills of research. You have to know what to do when you don't know what to do, as Jean Piaget put it. You have to have had practise at making use of libraries, art galleries, the internet, and most crucially, other people, through discussion and debate – the fourth I of *interaction*. Classrooms that are true 'communities of inquiry' do not just offer students meaty topics; they provide time to talk about what we are finding out about 'finding out', and to distil this home-grown, communally generated knowledge into public records and accumulating reminders of what creative learning involves.

The fifth, sixth and seventh Is are *imagination*, *intuition* and *intellect*. Imagination – using the inner theatre of the mind's eye to test out identities and possibilities - is not just a cute phase through which children pass on their way to 'formal operations: it is a learnable skill that underpins a great deal of lifelong learning. Imagery is the language of creativity, not words or formulae. Intuition is the skill of allowing things to come to you; of knowing how and when to put a problem on the back burner and let things bubble slowly up from what cognitive scientists now call the 'intelligent unconscious'. Constant pressure to be fast and explicit – to 'show your working' every minute of the day – is the enemy of intuition. And intellect, of course, is as vital

a complement to imagination and intuition as a knife is to a spoon and fork. You wouldn't eat spaghetti just with a knife any more than you would try to eat steak just with a spoon. Being creative involves mastering the arts of imagination, intuition and intellect, but more than that, of learning when and how to use them together.

And the eighth I, funnily enough, is *imitation*. All creativity stands on the shoulders of the learning *products* and the learning *methods* of other people. Other people are not just your co-explorers, they are your role models, and we pick up our habits of mind from those with whom we collaborate. Students' creativity is fed not by being taught how to 'brainstorm', but by the creative on-line wit and courage of their teachers. As Albert Einstein said, 'the only serious method of education is to be an example.' And he added, ruefully: 'If you can't help it, be a warning example.' If we are serious about wanting to help children cultivate a creative attitude to life, we cannot do it either by endless carping about their spelling, or by offering them amounts of unstructured freedom that they do not yet know how to use. We have to start by displaying to them our own creativity. And, like all effective coaches, a creativity coach has to walk the talk. Or perhaps, in the case of creativity, we should not so much be 'walking' it as dancing it.