

# Embracing Our Creativity

## A key ingredient of great teaching

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When adults discuss the subject of creativity, they often make a point of saying that they possess no creative ability themselves. Too often, I hear people say, "I haven't a creative bone in my body. I can't even draw stick figures."

Such comments reveal a remarkably narrow view of what it means to be creative. A limited perspective on creativity means that many educators are unlikely to be able to guide students in tapping into their own creative impulses — and it all but eliminates the possibility of assessing students who do engage in creative responses to assignments.

*Creative* is not synonymous with *artistic*. The idea that creativity is primarily an artistic phenomenon is a purely Western one. In Eastern cultures, in fact, people actually have a bias toward thinking of *science* as a center of creativity. Neither of these viewpoints is accurate, nor is either helpful in school.

Creativity is more accurately defined as the act of solving problems for which there are no easy answers — that is, problems for which popular or conventional responses don't work. Adaptability and flexibility of thought are essential to creativity, as is the ability to recognize ideas, alternatives, or possibilities that may be useful in solving problems and communicating with others, sometimes in an entertaining, nonlinear way.

Human beings are naturally inventive. We've all felt the need to communicate our ideas and values as well as to solve varied and complex problems in novel ways. These are skills that most adults already possess; they just aren't commonly identified as vehicles for creativity.

If you embrace flexibility, tolerance of ambiguity, unpredictability, and the enjoyment of discovering things unknown, you are embracing creativity. Indeed, we would be very limited individuals — and terrible teachers — if we were truly devoid of creativity.

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### A Creativity Crisis?

Anyone who has seen Sir Ken Robinson speak (or read his books or viewed his TED Talks) knows that he considers creativity an essential skill for our ever-changing, complex, at-risk world. Indeed, Robinson, among others, has made it clear that creativity is fundamental to our future success as a species. "My contention," he says, "is that creativity now is as important in education as literacy, and we should treat it with the same status." What he means is that, in school, if we teach children in ways that enhance their intuitive and creative abilities, we will be preparing them to meet new challenges with flexibility and inventiveness. When we nurture creative thought, we help a child to perceive underlying facts and ideas, to see old problems in new ways. When we nurture creativity in students, we help them to develop the very traits they will need in order to become the productive adults of tomorrow.

Unfortunately, we are not following Robinson's lead particularly well. Educational psychology professor Kyung Hee Kim has observed a recent drop in the creative skills among American children. In her 2010 research, Kim has performed analyses of creativity through a measure known as the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (TTCT) for almost 300,000 American adults and children. The TTCT measures the

creative mind in a variety of ways, including the creative potential in areas such as art, literature, science, mathematics, architecture, engineering, business, leadership, and interpersonal relationships. Through these tests, Kim has discovered that children in the United States, especially in kindergarten through third grade, are less creative than similar children of 20 years ago. In an interview, Kim outlines the problem:

"Countries investing in creativity can expect new ways of life and of governance, new materials and tools, and new technologies and occupations that we cannot even begin to imagine. This is why it is so important for the U.S. to recognize the importance of, and place a premium on, fostering creativity and creativity research — to put it simply, so the U.S. does not get left behind."

The reasons for this creative decline? While it's difficult to say definitively, Kim cites the increased emphasis on standardized testing and too much screen time among children. Kim's conjecture makes sense, but I'd also add that education's overall focus on teaching content for students to do well on those standardized tests — and this includes many independent school educators — has led us to downplay the importance of creativity in our teaching and in the work of our students.

By using effective techniques and strategies, teachers can empower students to develop their innate creative abilities. The skills that facilitate creative problem solving are competencies that are universally valued by educators and can easily be integrated into our current curricula — without sacrificing any of our academic standards.

As I've learned through my own teaching of art to elementary school students, we can and should teach sequentially when the process or material warrants it, but we can and should also teach creatively when warranted.

If you accept the premise that good teaching requires educators to not only tap into their own creativity, but also help nurture the creative skills in students, we have to start thinking about how to do both. No doubt, there are numerous ways to do this, but in my experience, focusing on the following four areas will lead to overall improved teaching:

- Understand and embrace the importance of experiential learning, in and out of the classroom.
- Model creativity for the students.
- Work to understand students' learning styles.
- Develop the teaching skills and techniques that enable creative engagement.

## **Experiential Learning**

Experiential learning is the process of learning from direct experience — from active physical and emotional engagement. Experiential learning usually extends over a period of time and involves a number of experiences integrated with directed, incremental impact. Students are not treated as passive receptacles to be filled with information; instead, they are active participants who shape the classroom experience.

Teachers who take an experiential approach to instruction become skilled at sizing up a situation in order to identify both the problems and opportunities. The generation of many solutions to a problem encourages — indeed, requires — divergent thinking. In such a setting, instructors serve as guides, mentors, and consultants. They develop approaches that honor varied styles of learning and facilitate open discussion, introducing new issues and concerns as needed. They encourage students to be experimental and flexible, all the while guiding the

learning process, monitoring performance, and encouraging feedback and self-analysis.

Fact-finding and thoughtful research are vital parts of experiential learning. Concrete facts can inform creativity, especially when students have discovered how to generalize their learning experiences for future use. An experiential approach gives students more choices about what to do next, rather than relying solely on teacher-directed activity. Educational goals are met by allowing the learning experience itself to influence the educational process.

### **Modeling Creativity**

What motivates human creativity? Sometimes creativity emerges because people need to solve a problem or communicate an idea. The desire for novel amusement or complex entertainment also inspires creative thought.

Environmental factors are also influential in motivating a student's creativity. An instructor's personal enthusiasm for the material taught can strengthen or dampen the creative impulse. A teacher who wholeheartedly embraces the curriculum inspires creative learning. When we nurture our own creativity, we find many opportunities to model the creative process for our students. Educating a child is almost always an imprecise process. When things don't go as planned, I like to laugh and share this fact with my students. By modeling constructive responses to making a mistake, we can show children that error is a natural part of the creative process, and that sometimes failure inspires us to new and more effective solutions.

As Nobel Prize-winning novelist Anatole France put it, "An education isn't how much you have committed to memory, or even how much you know. It's being able to differentiate between what you do know and what you don't. It's knowing where to go to find out what you need to know; and knowing how to use the information you get."

If our personal concept of what it means to be creative is narrow, we can't effectively nurture it in others.

### **Addressing Styles of Learning**

Students benefit when teachers diversify their teaching methods to address a wide range of learning styles. People perceive and process information in different ways. A student's approach to learning is based on personal strengths, weaknesses, and preferences. A preferred learning style may shift according to the task at hand, or one preference might remain strong and consistent throughout childhood. Students learn best when they are able to use a learning style with which they are comfortable. While most children are capable of using a variety of learning approaches, it's important to teach material in such a way that all students are given the opportunity to express themselves in the manner in which they feel most fluent,

otherwise we run the risk of squelching an individual's creativity and enthusiasm for learning.<sup>1</sup>

There are many available models describing styles of learning and how we can accommodate them in the classroom. My initial response to reviewing some of these models was to question how I could apply them to curriculum planning and teaching style in a natural and consistent manner. I decided to use this information to analyze my own approach to teaching. This proved to be a useful exercise. As with many adults, my preferred learning style changes with the task at hand. When writing curriculum, I favor a self-directed and strongly intuitive approach. I enjoy making changes to my curriculum, and I'm fortunate to be in a position that allows me to write my own material. I strive to connect with concepts in a way that allows me to teach students and educate myself at the same time. It proved problematic to refer only to existing models when assessing my teaching program; I sought a more personal and compelling connection to the material. So I decided that a more useful application of the various learning style models would be to reinterpret them in the form of a creativity checklist.

This checklist can be applied to my curriculum in order to ensure that I'm giving my students diverse opportunities to apply different learning styles. During performance assessments, the same checklist can be used to help recognize and nurture individual children's creative abilities as they manifest themselves.

I've organized my list into categories labeled "warm" and "cool." These terms derive from color mixing theory. Each color has a bias toward feeling warm or cool. The difference between one color and another can be quite subtle, but it always has a strong impact on how a painting is perceived. Color temperature terminology is personally meaningful to me, so I chose to organize my checklist in this manner — and I now make sure there are opportunities for both warm and cool elements to emerge in the course of my lessons. Thinking in terms of warm and cool learning styles helps me to readily internalize the concepts and techniques I'm looking for in any given lesson (see sidebar).

Teachers benefit from being sensitive to their own interests and favored approaches to learning. We can better nurture creativity in children when we understand and accept the ways in which we express our own creativity.

## Cool and Warm Teaching

### COOL creative problem-solving skills and techniques:

- Practical application of ideas through deductive reasoning
- Offering reasons for learning: references to real-life experience/potential usefulness
- Problem solving through group discussions
- Reflective and independent observation
- Adopting unusual visual and internal perspectives (seeing things from different angles)
- Generating several innovative and relevant ideas when problem solving
- Combining and synthesizing - capturing the essence of what's being expressed and identifying it visually
- Sequential problem solving
- Utilizing knowledge from a past experience for use in the present

### WARM creative problem-solving skills and techniques:

- Feeling, sensing, using imaginative intuition
- Being emotionally expressive/using fantasy
- Being verbally expressive/articulate storytelling
- Employing energetic movement or action: dance/song/rhyme
- Creating rich and colorful imagery to communicate with others
- Breaking and extending boundaries
- Using humor and spontaneity
- Desiring to formulate creative solutions
- Incorporating hands-on activity
- Reasonable risk taking

**Note:** I developed these lists from a number of sources, mainly:

Bernice McCarthy, "The 4-MAT System: Teaching to Learning Styles with Right/Left Mode Processing Techniques." [www.4mat.eu/4mat-who-developed-it.aspx](http://www.4mat.eu/4mat-who-developed-it.aspx).

Richard M. Felder and Linda K. Silverman, "Learning Styles and Teaching Styles in Engineering Education," *Engineering Education*, 78(7), 674-681 (1988).

Richard M. Felder, "Reaching the Second Tier: Learning and Teaching Styles in College Science Education," *Journal of College Science Teaching*, 23(5), 286-290 (1993).

M.K. Smith, "David A. Kolb on Experiential Learning," *Encyclopedia of Informal Education*, 2001. [infed.org/david-a-kolb-on-experiential-learning/](http://infed.org/david-a-kolb-on-experiential-learning/).

Anthony Gregorc, "Learning Styles Model," 1998. <http://gregorc.com/instrume.html>.

## **Putting It All Together**

I view my role in the classroom as similar to that of an orchestral conductor: I strive to enable students to be heard both independently and as part of a harmonious whole. Students thrive when we present a score that is written for the instruments they love to play.

Encouraging creativity in the classroom can inspire and motivate children in unforeseen ways. A healthy balance of purposeful direction and creative freedom delivers the best results: a strong and diverse classroom that is varied and flexible, able to shift course quickly while remaining enthusiastic about exploring any given subject — what is known and unknown.

There is value in learning to assess and identify creativity. If our personal concept of what it means to be creative is narrow, we can't effectively nurture it in others. Everyone benefits, especially children, when adults internalize a more expansive definition of human creativity. By embracing our own individual creativity, we can create an inspirational classroom that nurtures and encourages inventive and transformative thinking.

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### **Note**

1. "The Decline of Creativity in the United States: 5 Questions for Educational Psychologist Kyung Hee Kim," 2010 Encyclopedia Britannica blog interview. [www.britannica.com/blogs/2010/10/the-decline-of-creativity-in-the-united-states-5-questions-for-educational-psychologist-kyung-hee-kim/](http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2010/10/the-decline-of-creativity-in-the-united-states-5-questions-for-educational-psychologist-kyung-hee-kim/).