

What is Teacher Creativity?

This chapter explores the concept of teacher creativity. It discusses whether or not creativity within the classroom is an innate ability and a natural outcome of specific personality styles, or is instead a set of guiding principles and procedures that can be analyzed, quantified, duplicated, and then taught to others.

Today's students live in an ever changing technologically based world where the parameters of knowledge are redefining themselves almost daily. The Internet has given even the youngest of children access to information that at one time they could only acquire within the classroom or in a library. As a result teachers now find themselves competing for student time and attention. The allure of computers and video games is often overwhelming for young minds and many educators find themselves losing an ever escalating battle for their students' interest. As a result teachers are being called upon to develop more creative approaches in order to teach this new generation of students. The old tried and true methods of instruction no longer are by themselves sufficient and effective tools for teaching. The learning process has changed and teachers have been challenged to change as well, or be left behind. This change must involve new and creative approaches to everyday classroom instruction.

Are teachers born creative? Do only certain individuals have an innate ability to motivate and instruct in unique and exciting ways? Is creativity simply a natural outcome of specific personality types? If so, then most educators are doomed to decades of routine classroom interaction. On the other hand, if creativity can be studied and better understood, if its guiding principles can be identified and

duplicated, and then taught to others, then all teachers can be given an invaluable tool that will bring their classrooms to life. This would indeed be a gift that would transform the mundane into the exciting.

It can be reasonably asserted that certain personality types and individual styles more readily lend themselves naturally to creative outlooks and approaches within the classroom. It is a fact that some teachers are just better at attracting and maintaining students' attention. However, it can also, as reasonably, be argued that much of what educators do and how they do it, leaves ample room for modification, refinement, and enhancement. As such creativity then can be seen not as just a natural ability possessed by a chosen few, but a methodological approach that can be mastered by almost all. By simply modify their perspective on what teacher creativity is, educators can open the door to a myriad of possibilities.

Contrary to appearance, creativity is hard work. Those teachers who introduce and implement exciting and innovative approaches to their daily lessons do so only after extensive planning and preparation. That is the good news. If creativity is working hard at applying our knowledge, and if it is working consistently to utilize our talents, then creativity can better be understood by looking at what we do in a different light. Teachers who wish to be more creative must first express a willingness to change their approach to teaching. The need for change can best be understood and more readily accomplished by understanding that education by and large lies in "what" educators do in the classroom. If teachers change "what" they do, they change the outcome of the

learning process. The key question becomes which “whats” must be evaluated and changed?

Examining The Key Whats

There are several questions that teachers must ask themselves. This first set of questions should serve the purpose of better clarifying just what goals the teacher wishes to accomplish. As such they would include the following:

- What specific knowledge am I trying to impart to my students?
- What value will my students gain from mastering this knowledge?
- What are my expectations for them as they are learning?
- What responses am I looking for from my students?

In response to these questions, teachers should begin by examining the specific subject materials they are currently teaching. Each school curriculum contains an overwhelming amount of material to be taught. Not only must teachers determine which of these materials they will stress, they must also solve an additional dilemma. As most educators are painfully aware, there is a continuous expansion of discipline related information daily. Each new school day brings with it new subject knowledge. Since it is impossible to expand the curriculum to incorporate the influx of all of this new information, teachers must make informed decisions on what to include and what to exclude from their daily lesson plans. Teachers must be willing to eliminate older material that is no longer relevant or that must yield to more current and more important materials.

It is therefore essential that teachers determine from the onset which areas they deem to be the most crucial, which areas their students can reasonably be

expected to master, and which areas will yield the most benefit. Doing so not only means revamping day to day classroom procedures, but often strategies and methodologies as well. Relegating familiar lesson plans to the knowledge trash pile is not an easy task. It is like saying goodbye to old and trusted friends. It is a courageous act and at times a risky venture. It is though an essential component of good teaching and an excellent way to shake up classroom activities. In the final analysis, the rewards are well worth the efforts because such changes help teachers arm their students with knowledge that will better equip them to be more successful once they leave school.

These changes also help teachers define what expectations they wish to establish for their students and which student responses they wish to encourage. Probably though the greatest benefit from such an endeavor is that educators will begin to look at what they teach in a whole new light and the door to unique and innovative approaches to instruction will be opened and the creative juices will begin to flow.

As teachers complete this clarification of which curriculum areas to explore new questions present themselves. Teachers begin to ask themselves the following:

- What methods am I employing?
- What materials and tools am I using to assure that my lesson

objectives will be

successful?

- What are my modes of assessing whether or not my students have acquired the

knowledge I want them to possess?

Exploring the many possible answers to these questions will lay the foundation for increasing a teacher's ability to be more creative. Teachers must begin by looking at their lessons differently. They must be willing to utilize different methodologies, strategies, and approaches to instruction, and they must also be willing to change their assessment tools and evaluation criteria. Teachers are trained in a variety of educational theories and methodologies. Unfortunately, too many educators settle in and become comfortable with implementing only a select few of these strategies. Although lecturing is an important means to communicate essential material that students should learn, it is widely overused because many educators mistakenly believe it is the easiest and most efficient way to disseminate information.

Even when newer or more innovative methods of instruction are utilized they are often done so without fully understanding how best to implement these techniques. The result is the failure to achieve stated objectives and the inability to meet student needs. For example, how many teachers have attempted to utilize cooperative learning groups only to discover that their efforts were doomed because they failed to establish the groups according to important methodological criteria, or neglected to take the time to establish guidelines for their students to follow while working in such groups. As a result their attempts to

be more innovative and creative result in failure and disillusionment, not only on their part, but on the part of their students as well.

Therefore, it is essential that teachers not only attempt to utilize new and creative methods of instruction, but that they do so only after they have a firm understanding and mastery of these techniques. This mastery can be acquired either through training or by observation of other teachers who effectively utilize such strategies. By acquiring such expertise teachers establish foundations for success within their classrooms. With proper training teachers can open the door to a whole new world of instruction, a world where they can excite, challenge, and empower students. Simply by effectively changing modes of instruction teachers can transform a classroom from a four walled room filled with educational hopes into an environment that piques curiosity, beckons children to learn, and embraces creativity.

Closely related to how educators teach is what materials they utilize to get their messages across. Students today have grown up in a world where technology is an everyday part of their lives. Teachers can use this fact to their advantage. With the proliferation of computers both in school and in most homes, teachers have the opportunity to tap into a new and exciting way to teach. Information that once took days or even weeks to research can now be found in a matter of hours or minutes through the Internet. This means that teachers can now develop lessons that allow students to spend their time doing more than just gathering information. With fewer time constraints the parameters for learning and discovery can be greatly expanded.

The Internet is just one aspect of technology that teachers can use to their advantage. The advent of the computer has provided a plethora of software programs that can help teachers reach students that once fell through the educational cracks. Effective use of these programs for instruction can free up more teacher time and allow educators to better meet individual student needs. The technological age has also produced a wide range of other classroom instructional tools such as laser disks, digital visual disks, and compact disks which can all be effectively utilized.

Computers are but only one tool that creative teachers can use to educate. There are also countless other materials including innovative textbooks, games, and manipulatives to name but just a few. Using these, a teacher can make education more exciting and in the process develop genuine and authentic student learning. If teachers are willing to utilize a wide variety of teaching tools, and if they are properly trained on how to do so, the possibilities are indeed limitless.

Hand in hand with changes in methodology and the use of instructional materials is the need for educators to take a closer and more informed look at how they evaluate their students' abilities and progress. Today many teachers wrongly rely on pre-written chapter tests which make evaluation seem easier and provide a sense of continuity and equity. However, these tests often do not truly measure students' abilities or knowledge levels. These examinations are geared to evaluating a homogenous based student population that in theory has understood and mastered the major tenets of a chapter or unit within the

textbook. As most teachers know this is often not the case. As a result, these texts more often than not are not equitable, are not true indicators of all students' abilities, do not accurately reflect what teachers have taught, and are not reliable means of assessment.

If the goal of assessment and the tools educators utilize to evaluate student skills and abilities are designed to determine levels of student understanding and mastery of important concepts and factual knowledge, then once again teachers must be willing to be more creative and flexible in developing evaluative instruments that will best meet these goals. Good teachers understand that students vary in their abilities to demonstrate just what they know. Some students are good test takers, others possess excellent orator skills, while others fare best through writing. Some are individual hands on learners while others work best in a group environment. If an educator's goal is indeed to correctly evaluate student progress, then the only truly equitable method to do so is to determine how this objective can best be accomplished for each individual student within the class. Contrary to belief it is not more equitable to test everyone the same way. In fact it is totally inappropriate and unfair to do so. What is wrong with allowing students to demonstrate their mastery of knowledge through any means that they are most comfortable with and in ways that are most likely to produce success for them? The answer is that nothing is wrong with this.

By utilizing varied and different methods of assessment the teacher accomplishes three major goals. First, the student is provided with opportunities

for success. Second, a teacher's ability to more effectively evaluate students is honed and enhanced. Finally, testing becomes an extension of the learning process itself and not just a periodic evaluation of what has been or has not been learned.

The willingness on the part of teachers to make such crucial changes can make all the difference in the world for students. These changes can provide new opportunities for learning and new hope for so many students who have given up. These changes can help better prepare students to take their place in an ever changing and more demanding world that awaits them once they leave school. It seems to simple, but by changing how they teach, what materials they use in their teaching, and how they assess what their students have learned, teachers infuse their classrooms with excitement, curiosity, and most of all creativity.

Once teachers have made the commitment to change, they are ready to ask themselves the following crucial questions.

- What are other educators doing that I can use in my classroom?
- In what areas do I need to improve my own skills or knowledge base?
- What other sources of information are available that I am not currently benefiting from?

Schools are a wonderful and vast mix of individuals with unique educational styles and perspectives on how to teach. They are a smorgasbord of

personalities all blended together. Teachers who wish to be creative can tap into this pool of diversity. By viewing everyday lessons from other's perspectives teachers can gain new insights on how to develop different and often innovative ways to teach. Many professions encourage colleagues to share special expertise. The teaching profession should do so as well. Teachers should find time to share ideas and tap into the expertise and the creativity of others, not only within their own school, but elsewhere as well. This might mean a stronger commitment to attending conferences or seminars, or returning to school for a graduate course, or a willingness to work on a research project. It most assuredly means a larger time commitment. This time investment though can yield incredible returns. Creative teachers immerse themselves into life and learn from the experience.

Shared perspectives, shared knowledge, and shared experiences are key foundational building blocks for creativity. Teachers who wish to be creative and wish to translate that creativity into exciting lessons within their classrooms must understand that this is true.

Not only must teachers increase their knowledge and skills, they must also increase their understanding of the students they teach. Each year teachers meet an ever changing student population. Today's students are completely different than those of just a few years ago. As the world has changed so have the children who have grown up in it. In some ways they are more sophisticated than previous generations. On the other hand, they also face greater problems than those who came before them.

In order to be effective educators, teachers must learn to change as well. Although there are certain basic aspects of teaching that will always remain constant, there are many areas in which teachers must be retrained. By fully developing their skills as teachers, by expanding expertise and knowledge in their disciplines and by gaining more insight into the very children that they teach, educators can become more effective communicators with their students. Overall professional improvement lends itself naturally to more effective and creative lessons within the classroom.

In addition to increased expertise and better understanding of students, teachers must also be willing to continually seek out new ways of transmitting knowledge to those they teach. For many teachers, the textbook is their exclusive source of information. Others supplement their texts with outside readings. The more technologically minded add the Internet and computers to their repertory of tools. Still others seek out less traditional but yet viable sources. The creative teachers though are constantly looking for and utilizing any and all sources that will help them impart important knowledge. These sources may include speakers, discussion with other professionals, hands on activities, or even trips into the community to better understand how the theories taught in the classroom stand up in the real world.

The most creative teachers have come to the understanding that they no longer need to be the sole disseminators of knowledge. They have come to the realization that by utilizing other informational sources they can more effectively

get their message across. These are lessons that all teachers can and should learn.

By showing a willingness to change and by commitment to professional growth, educators can make great strides towards becoming creative teachers. For those who have done so, there remains but one final question to ask and answer.

- What now?

Good teachers, creative teachers are never satisfied with the status quo. They understand that past accomplishments do not guarantee future successes. Creative teachers are perpetually curious. They constantly seek new ways to improve their abilities and they eagerly explore alternative avenues that can lead them to greater insights. As such, they are among the most elite of their profession.

In closing, it can be seen that most, if not all, educators can indeed become more creative teachers within their classrooms. Creativity is not simply a gift from the gods that some teachers possess and others do not. It is instead an expertise that can be acquired and nurtured.

Maybe in the final analysis the question, “what is teacher creativity?” is not really a question at all, but a statement, a statement that tells educators that when they change the whats that they do, they themselves will change in the process into more creative teachers.