

Creativity as Pre-Wired

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I know to some extent that people are wired specific ways. I first realized this in sixth grade when I met my very good friend. She is a numbers girl. We clashed about problem solving when in work or study groups quite a lot. I started to realize that her brain was wired to simple facts with fast and simple outcomes. I saw different outcomes but couldn't really explain them in a fast and simple manner. This concept has been proven to me over the years with more than scientific journal articles but with my experience in the classroom. There it is labeled as different learning styles.

The more I think and look into these differences the more I found them to shape how I teach. And it starts with what a student is doing when nothing is going on. "When there is nothing specific to do, our thoughts soon return to the most predictable state, which is randomness or confusion." (Csikszentmihalyi, 348). This is one of the opening sentences in how to cultivate flow in everyday life. The idea that when there is no external force our brain loses focus. Anyone can attest to this. What intrigues me is what types of lost focus a creative person turns to versus someone who tends to not be creative.

My mother is a very creative person. She has been an artist her whole life and often finds answers to my problems where I would not see any. So I asked her what she thinks of when there is nothing going on. She said that she never has nothing going on. That even when there is nothing going on she stares at something and thinks of that.

I then talked to an old student of mine about this topic. First off the student I talk to was one of the kids I referred to below. He grew up an only child to two working parents who really never took an active part in his life. Prior to coming to the school I worked at he rarely went to school and spent most of his day sitting around Brooklyn doing absolutely nothing. He has since graduated from West Point and is doing very well out in Hawaii. While I am very proud of what he has accomplished I would not rank him very high in the creative department. I asked him what he thinks about when there is nothing going on. At first he said nothing - that he thinks of nothing. When I asked him to elaborate he said that his brain just goes blank. He often doesn't even really remember what he was thinking of before.

I believe that stimuli plays a large role in creativity. And this is where a teacher can step in. As a teacher I can put an image up on the board and as the students to write about it. A creative student will immediately have hundreds of ideas flowing while the non-creative thinker is still blank. Both are not ideal for the lesson. Too many ideas that have branched and branched off topic or none at all. So regardless of what their brain is doing, myself as the teacher, needs to guide their thinking.

One activity I have started with students is pair thinking. I purposefully match up students from different ends of the spectrum. I want them to sound off each other. So once in pairs I put a DBQ up on the board and give them 30 minutes to bullet out answers. When I had done this in the past I always came up with either answers that did not relate at all or ones that were too simple. By putting them together I think their brains start to work towards a better answer.

Creativity might be pre-wired into a brain but cultivating that towards a desired goal is required. And that cultivation can bring both ends of the spectrum towards a creative flow - the pre-wired and the not.

“To look at different things, and to look at them differently” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1995). This sentence comes from the introduction of the Internal Traits section of *Enhancing Personal Creativity*. The section of the chapter is focusing on John Gardner and it describes him as initially being very introverted. Which was the first and most prominent of the internal traits I had come up with last week. The reading goes on to describe why letting these internal traits run your external persona is a bad life choice. The article talks about Gardner scaring away applicants because he kept all his thoughts internal and projected nothing. I agree that people need to be aware of how their internal traits come across externally. I have a friend very much like John Gardner in that she is an extreme introvert. It has unfortunately lost her a few jobs because the people who work under her complain that they get not positive feedback from her. That she is ‘cold’. I know her as a very creative and excited person but also know she keeps that all on the inside. I agree with the reading that people need to express personality in positive ways to the outside. She needs to learn to express that exuberant mind externally.

When I think to link my experience with her to that of a classroom I remember meetings I have attended about grading. Standard quizzes and tests filled with multiple choice bubbles will not work with everyone.

Grading someone like John Gardner can be a very difficult task. While a simple test is easiest for the teacher to configure, give, and then grade that method might not showcase the skill or knowledge a student has in fact learned. I have found over many years that bringing in a wide range of grading methods yields a much larger pool of information on my students and their progress with the material. One method I use is to let students pick. At the end of the unit I have tried letting them choose between a test, a paper, and an oral presentation. All based on the same information and all set up to require similar work – I have found this to be a great way to encompass students who might not be good at normal methods of showcasing skill (like a written test). The only down side comes from the extra work it brings me. But the results of these different applications are marvelous.

When I first think of applications of creative energy I think of a problem solver. Not necessarily someone who can fix everything but someone who thinks of things no one else has yet. Like the class website listed: Divergent Thinking. I would define the person as someone who probably wouldn’t be the first called to solve a problem (as in not obviously skilled in the area) but would be one to walk by answer the question in their unique way without being asked.

When I think of application as related to teaching I find myself drawn to a situation when I was a teenager. The second half of my junior year of high school I was an exchange student in Australia. And while there was a small language barrier (if the lights go out and someone asks you for a torch they don’t mean for you to grab a stick and lighter fluid but a flashlight) I got along just fine. But I was also placed in a family with another exchange student. Mariela was from Brazil and not quite up on her English. So we were put in most classes together in the local high school and I worked as a translator. An outsider’s first thought would be “did/do I speak Portuguese?” No, I do not. But I became very good at finding synonyms to things/words she did not understand.

I think my job of explaining things to her from many different approaches is similar to what a teacher does when they apply creative thinking. They are trying to get a topic to a student who isn’t grasping it the first time. This is a very valuable skill as all

kids (and any adult we may run into - not just limited to a classroom) learn differently.

If I were to take a polling of my students looking into their learning strengths and weaknesses, their pre-wiring and methods of information integration it would be clear that no two are alike. I cannot simply teach a topic one way.

One activity I have started based off this idea is the 'Lab Report Report'. Instead of the traditional lab report most science students write weekly I assign an oral report to each group, with each group having a specific focus from the lab. Fridays are then spent on oral presentations. The method of delivery is up to them. Most make PowerPoint's but simple board writing with pictures is fine. I enjoy the diversity they present.

The best results I have seen from installing the skill of fluency in my students comes from other teachers in other subjects. When they have a project that can be linked to what we are doing in my class and they bring information across I know they have attained a solid understanding of my material.

I truly believe that through analyzing what makes a creative person and how to cultivate creativity in others I have found ways to teach that will reach many more students. By realizing that I myself am a creative minded thinker and how others of a not-so creative wiring see the world and see myself I can become more open to them and pass more knowledge along. I find that teaching in a classroom that holds a wide range of student minds being able to take apart their thinking method and apply skills that work towards a goal will serve me very well in the years to come.