

Being Creative

The challenge of change in the classroom



Chaz Pugliese

DELTA TEACHER DEVELOPMENT SERIES





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Series editors Mike Burghall and Lindsay Clandfield

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1. Auflage 1 9 8 7 6 5 | 2025 24 23 22 21

© Delta Publishing 2010
www.deltapublishing.co.uk
www.klett-sprachen.de/delta
© Ernst Klett Sprachen GmbH, Stuttgart 2017

ISBN 978-3-12-501351-3

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Edited by Mike Burghall
Designed by Christine Cox
Cover photo © iStockphoto.com/Vladimir Sklyarow
Printed in Germany by CEWE Stiftung & Co. KGaA, Germering

Acknowledgements

It has been said that a book is never the fruit of one writer's work. This book is no exception, and so much of what it is about comes through friends, mentors, colleagues. Thus it is with a sense of deep gratitude and obligation that I wish to thank the following:

Rick Cooper for the many enriching conversations, and for unlimited helpful advice.

Mario Rinvulcri for his support, for challenging my thoughts on creativity and for continued inspiration.

Seeing my colleagues Bonnie Tsai, Hania Kryszewska, Sheelagh Deller, Simon Marshall, Paul Davis and many others in action has often reminded me what creative teaching is all about.

I also owe a great debt to my sister, Bettie Petith, and uncle Jep for their wisdom and for pointing me in the right direction.

I'm grateful, too, to Lorna Monahan for her comments on the draft.

In addition I would like to thank Nick Boisseau at DELTA, who believed in the project, and my two editors, Lindsay Clandfield and Mike Burghall, for helping so skillfully and enthusiastically to make it into a book, and for being so incredibly supportive. And not forgetting Christine Cox for her very fine design.

Some of the activities have been developed with teachers I have worked with throughout the years: they are too numerous to mention, so a collective, heartfelt thank you will have to suffice.

Finally, for their infinite patience, for putting up with a husband and father *in absentia*, I am immensely grateful to my wife Anna Pia and to our two children, Roberto Miles and Beatrice Gabriella.

This book is dedicated to AP

From the author

I have always thought of creativity as a journey, and of the creative individual as an explorer. The great film director Federico Fellini used to say that you always need an excuse to be creative. My own excuse to set off on a creativity journey is, quite simply, that I owe it to my students and, ultimately, to myself. Because I love teaching, finding a creative voice is the only way I know to avoid getting stuck in a rut.

Creativity is a key that will open many doors. It can trigger many changes for the better in a vast array of human endeavours. Teaching included. And yet it has always puzzled me that people rarely think of teachers as creative professionals. Architects? Yes. Musicians? Yes. Painters? Writers? Fashion designers? Yes. But teachers? You must be joking.

And yet creativity is, in my view, any teacher's bread and butter. We live in a culture that doesn't encourage us to be creative unless there's a chance we are going to strike it big with a commercial 'hit'. Creativity, like so much else in our world, has been co-opted into consumerism and its worth calculated by how much money it generates.

The teaching world is no exception: the big pull is towards standardisation, exams, regimented syllabi, a senseless 'don't rock the boat' attitude – intellectual shortsight that will do nobody a favour. The Victorian art critic John Ruskin, when asked why he was teaching factory workers to draw, said: 'I'm not teaching them to draw, I'm teaching them to see.'

Isn't learning a language, too, a way of learning to see anew? I would venture to say that enhanced seeing and feeling are the real reasons to create, whether it is an exercise, a song, a haiku, or a brand new thought.

I wrote *Being Creative* because I am convinced that creativity, far from being a magic wand, can bring changes for the better in our classrooms and we ourselves can *make* these changes happen. Think how much better off we would be if public education opened itself more to creative collaboration with the students.

Creativity is not an optional extra – as I see it, it is the foundation to base our practice upon.

Happy reading.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Char', with a stylized, cursive script.

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'Creativity is necessary for our survival as a species. Our health, happiness and futures depend on our individual and collective creativeness.'

(J P Guilford)

'Without creativity, it would be difficult indeed to distinguish humans from apes.'

(M Csikszentmihalyi)



Being creative

A book is like a house, with several different rooms or areas. The area you are now entering is an imaginary study corner: you may learn something in a general way about creativity and in a more particular way how you can use creativity in your teaching. I will refer to major creativity researchers' findings and will try to supply answers to these important questions:

- What is creativity?
- Can we all be creative?
- Why is creativity important in teaching?
- What are some key strategies to teach more creatively?

First, though, I think it would be a good idea to take a look at what has happened in the field throughout the centuries. In a sense, the history of the research is fairly straightforward and could be summarised in four neat stages:

- In the earliest times until the Renaissance, the predominant belief was that all the innovations were inspired by gods.
- During the Renaissance, this view gave way to the idea that creativity is genetic.
- At the beginning of the 19th century, the debate was 'nurture versus nature'.
- In recent times, there has been growing acceptance of so-called bio-psychological theories of creativity: that is, the belief that certain acts are generated by a complex interaction of biological, psychological and social factors.

To begin with, a caveat: I must plead guilty to an element of chauvinism. I know I haven't been able to do justice to the whole world beyond Europe and North America. I have tried, but there's still too much whiteness.

The concept of creativity

Of creativity it has been said that it is one of those entities that all understand implicitly, but that none can define to the satisfaction of everyone (Sterling ¹). The roots of the word are the Latin *creare*, which means 'to produce, generate, create'. According to Piirto ², the word 'creativity' has not been in use for long, its coinage dating back to the end of the 19th or beginning of the 20th century (Melville actually used the term 'creativity' in *Moby Dick* in 1841). While other cognate terms such as 'creation', 'creator' and 'create' were used much earlier, Pope ³ claims that the first recorded use of the word 'creativity' is as recent as 1875 (Oxford English Dictionary). A plethora of books have been written to offer advice on how to boost one's creativity, or how to lead one's life more creatively. This would make one think that creativity is not in search of a definition. Not so. Creativity has multiple meanings and a large

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body of the literature developed on the subject since the 1960s reveals that the meaning of creativity (or of a creative person) depends on the context in which the words are employed.

- Commenting on the situation in 1961, Rhodes states that *'the profusion of definitions was enough to give one the impression that creativity is a province for pseudo-intellectuals'*⁴.
- Some twenty years later, Welsch concluded his literature review thus: *'the literature contains such variance of definitions statements that the task of defining the concept of creativity is a challenging one'*⁵.

And the concept is still rather slippery today, so much so that it is not at all rare to see that in an attempt to pin it down, creativity is often reduced to a series of shallow sound bites by the media, politicians or business people. How is it possible, then, that a concept so widely used remains so difficult to define? Perry offers a rather convincing explanation:

*'Whenever a word is frequently used in arguments trying to persuade people to believe some opinion or other, our mental twists and turns to make the opinion plausible involve shifting from meaning to meaning without realizing it. This has happened to creativity on a grand scale ... For some it is the talisman to open the gate of a better world: for others the gate opens alright, but to confusion, formlessness, incoherence and vague curricular content.'*⁶

Likewise, Rouquette⁷ says that difficulties to conceptualise creativity stem from the concept being so widespread. Storr⁸ is somewhat cruder when he writes that *'no human being can possibly know enough to produce a comprehensive study of all that can be comprised under the heading 'creativity''*.

The genesis of genius

Theories and ideas about creativity originate far back in history. This should not come as any surprise because, as Ryhammer and Brodin⁹ point out, the development of new ideas and original products is a quintessentially human characteristic. The concept of inspiration, or getting an idea, is based on the belief that a superior power is responsible for it – and it is found in Greek, Judaic, Christian and Muslim traditions.

- In ancient Greece, it was the idea of spirit that was predominant: Plato, for instance, insisted that a poet cannot create without his inspiring muse; and Homer talked about a muse as a divinity whose main responsibility was to inspire the poet and guide his work along.
- In Rome, Cicero affirmed that every spiritual work should be accomplished under the aegis of the muse. This mystical approach associated inspiration to frenzy, irrational euphoria, and was all-pervasive. Later on, due to political and religious pressure under the Roman Empire, creativity – or, rather, talent or unusual ability by an individual, almost always a male (Albert and Runco¹⁰) – and all things associated with it fell out of fashion. But the concept of the inspiring muse never really went away.

We fast forward to the Middle Ages: for Dante Alighieri, for example, poets needed divine intervention if they were to create, hence the aim of his famous *'invocazione'*, a hymn to the muse, usually the opening of a poem. The Renaissance brought creative production under the spotlight again and the 18th century saw the genesis of the concept of genius, and in particular the foundations upon which it is based. This spurred heated debates on the *'genius versus talent'* *querelle*. Thus Duff (1767, cited in Becker¹¹) draws a line between a talented individual and a genius, the former displaying superior performance but not necessarily superior thought. According to him, the creative genius is the combination of an innate capacity to combine ideas and the evaluation of a new idea, as well as the aesthetic elements that accompany and guide the quest for original thinking. So the notion that creativity was a form of genius started to take shape, *de facto* helping to phase out the supernatural aspect that was widespread in ancient times.

How is it possible that a concept so widely used remains so difficult to define?

The concept of inspiration is based on the belief that a superior power is responsible for it – and it is found in Greek, Judaic, Christian and Muslim traditions.

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