

Overcoming Misunderstandings on the Importance of Creativity

by Don Treffinger

Educators are often called upon, for a variety of reasons (but especially in difficult economic times), to justify their interest in and attention to creativity in their instructional programs. Why should we be concerned with creativity in the schools? In order to respond effectively to these questions, we might begin by dealing with some common misunderstandings about creativity, and then focus on several positive and important contributions of creativity to learning.

Common Misunderstandings

Several common misunderstandings about creativity can hamper peoples' understanding and acceptance about its role in teaching and learning.

1. Reducing creativity to exercises and workbook activities.

Many specific strategies or techniques can be used to help people generate many ideas, look at ideas from different viewpoints, produce unusual or original ideas, or elaborate and add detail and richness to their ideas. These basic "tools" for divergent thinking have been very popular because they are easy to use and can be applied at many age levels and across a wide variety of content areas. As a result, they have been incorporated into many courses, workshops, and books about creativity, and emphasized in many published books and programs for classroom use. We believe these fundamental divergent thinking operations, and the four strategies used to enhance them, can be important and valuable components of creativity development efforts in education. Unfortunately, however, their popularity may have misled some people into the belief that these exercises and activities might be equated with the entire concept of creativity. Creative growth requires one to apply energy and motivation to generating and analyzing ideas, solving problems, making decisions, planning, and carrying ideas into action—all over a considerable period of time. It cannot be reduced to the simplistic application of a few "gadgets" or to the teacher's request that students "take out your creativity workbook and do a few pages."

2. Viewing creativity only as arts and crafts.

Some people view creativity only in relation to artistic or musical productivity. This, too, is a misunderstanding. Although there certainly is considerable creativity in many aspects of the fine arts, there are important ways in which creativity is involved in every other discipline as well. Creativity plays a vital role in contributions to writing and literature, mathematics, science, technology, the humanities, and the social and behavioral sciences, as people develop new theories, plan and conduct original inquiry, solve problems, create new products, communicate their results, and apply their efforts in many new contexts.

3. Viewing creativity only as a rare form of genius.

To a number of educators, creativity seems unimportant in their daily work because they view it only as a rare and special “gift,” beyond the reach of most people. They think of creativity only in terms of the exceptional work of a Picasso, a Rembrandt, a Mozart, a Shakespeare, or an Edison. They overlook the many ways we all use creativity in everyday life and work: finding new ideas, seeing new or varied possibilities, coming up with unique solutions to problems at home or on the job. We would do well to keep in mind Maslow’s wise observation that a “first rate chicken soup” might be more creative than a third-rate painting. All students can learn to use better our imagination, to generate new ideas, and to solve problems more effectively.

4. Treating creativity as “comic relief” from the real work of learning.

Unfortunately, some educators think of creativity only as something to use to provide students with some playful time and activities to step away from the recall and recitation they consider to be the more serious and important agenda of school learning. (“Boys and girls, you’ve been working hard all morning, and I’m sure all your brains are getting tired. So we won’t do any real work for a while. We’ll do our creativity now.”) This kind of thinking fails to recognize that creativity is part of effective inquiry and learning. In recent years, we have begun to see growing interest in “authentic” instruction, or in emphasizing the importance of what students are able to do with what they know, not just how much they know. Creativity builds on memory and past experience, but goes beyond; it helps create the foundation for application, synthesis, and action.

5. Looking only at creative teaching, and not at creative learning.

In visits to schools, principals often say, “You must visit Mr. Soozy’s (or Ms. Soozy’s class—this person is the most creative teacher in our entire school.” This very often leads to observation of some unusual (and occasionally, bizarre) kinds of teacher activity; much less frequently are there indication of the students’ creativity at work. At the elementary level, for example, it often leads to a trip to a classroom richly decorated and filled with brightly-colored and busy bulletin boards--made by the teacher. At the middle or senior high levels, the “creative teacher” is often the building’s maverick or eccentric in residence, and sometimes the most prominent indicator of the creativity in the classroom is an unusual degree of clutter (all kinds of things, piled everywhere!). Perhaps many of these teacher efforts are used to promote or stimulate students’ creative thinking. Too often, one fears, they are instead the manifestation only of the teacher’s own creativity, not the students’, or at worst, the superficial trappings of someone playing the stereotyped role of the “creative person.” We might hold that creative teaching is not a very meaningful concept unless or until it focuses on ways to stimulate creative learning by the students.

6. Holding narrow, outdated views of basic skills.

Some people urge that schools should focus their attention primarily, or even exclusively, on the basic skills. There are too little time and too few resources, they argue, to waste energy on other “frills.” Unfortunately, these critics usually have a very narrow and outdated view of basic skills. Many contemporary views of the important goals and outcomes for education point out clearly that today’s learners need to become proficient in a new and more complex set of basic outcomes than we have ever defined before. In order to become successful and competitive in today’s world (and tomorrow’s), students must master such new basics as teamwork and collaboration, leadership, technology, communication, adaptability, and problem solving. Many recent reports from educators, governmental agencies, professional organizations within and outside education, and corporations, have emphasized the great importance of creative thinking, critical thinking, problem solving, and decision-making for all students.

Importance of Creativity

When we have been able to set aside these common misunderstandings, it becomes easier to see several reasons for the importance of creativity in education.

1. Creative learning helps students to identify and solve problems independently and resourcefully.
2. Creative learning helps students to deal effectively with future problems, challenges, and opportunities that we now cannot even anticipate.
3. Creative learning provides skills that will be important and necessary to be successful in the workplace, today and in the future.
4. Creative learning provides rich and varied opportunities for personal growth, expression, and satisfaction in one’s personal life.
5. Creative learning is an important component of authentic instruction and authentic assessment; it involves processes that are fundamental to outcomes valued in the real world.