



Creativity Honoring Humanity

Dr. Steven Van Zoost

So there I was in St. John's, last spring, honouring creativity. A three-tiered highly-decorated cake was being used as a visual model to explain a hierarchy of resources needed to foster creativity in our classrooms. I've been teaching graduate courses in education since 1999, and this was the first time that I've designed a course specifically about creative teaching pedagogies and practices. It was also the first time that a teacher had used a cake as a visual aid. We ate it too.

You've probably heard it time and time before: what we need is an educational system that promotes creativity in our students. In his popular TedTalk, Sir Ken Robinson defines creativity as having original ideas that have value. He argues that we need to prepare students to be wrong and that we need to value mistakes. Robinson calls for change in our school systems so that they nurture rather than undermine creativity. Few would argue with such a vision of education, but it begs the question, can creativity really be taught?

According to psychologist Ellis Paul Torrance, creativity involves four characteristics:

- 1 flexibility – you can change from one means of developing ideas to another

- 2 fluency – you can produce many different ideas about a concept

- 3 originality – you can produce novel, exceptional, or innovative ideas

- 4 elaboration – you can extend, build, or complete ideas

While any definition of creativity is contestable, I find these characteristics pragmatic for thinking about my classroom planning. It's helpful to divide the concept of creativity into smaller parts—flexibility, fluency, originality, and elaboration—when designing activities for my classroom. Rather than asking myself, “How can I encourage creativity in students’ responses?” I can ask myself “How can I encourage fluency in students’ re-



sponses?” or “How can I encourage originality in my students’ responses?” This seems much more manageable to me.

All of us can foster creativity in our students by planning classroom activities that invite students to demonstrate flexibility, fluency, originality, and elaboration in their thinking and in their products. When the tasks that we create endorse these skills, they become valued by students. In turn, creativity is valued in our classrooms. Sir Ken Robinson challenges us to honour creativity through systemic change. I challenge us to honour creativity through what we can do in our classroom—by focusing on our pedagogies and practices.

Creative Pedagogies

I may have convinced you that creativity *can* be taught or at least fostered, but many argue that this is largely dependent on the learning environment. That’s why I am inspired by creative pedagogies that encourage students to be actively involved in their learning environment. I’m inspired by how the arts can be used to create inclusive classrooms and how place-based education can create community understandings. How inquiry-based projects can transform classrooms, how transdisciplinary education can transform schools, and how social action projects can transform students. These aren’t buzz-words that sound magnificent; they are pedagogical approaches that magnify the importance of students’ participatory role in designing our classroom programs. Here are six of my favourite “creative pedagogies”:

Place-based education uses the local community to achieve curriculum outcomes.

Inquiry-based learning uses students’ questions, problems, or issues to achieve curriculum outcomes.

Social action projects use students’ concerns about the world to achieve curriculum outcomes.

Multidisciplinary learning uses separate disciplines to examine a common theme or issue in order to achieve curriculum outcomes.

Interdisciplinary learning uses connections across disciplines to achieve curriculum outcomes.

Transdisciplinary learning dissolves discipline-based boundaries to create new approaches to achieve curriculum outcomes.

Every year, I create space in a course to explore creative pedagogies based on my students’ interests. I can never predict where such paths will lead and, I admit, it takes some courage to get to know and follow the interests of students. Such pedagogical stances have led us into place-based education and poetry connections where my class, after visiting communities and their renowned poets, created Wikipedia entries for the community of Three Mile Plains (and poet Dr. George Elliot Clarke) as well as the community of Stanley (and poet Alden Nowlan). Another year, an inquiry-based project about 21st Century Communities resulted in a class trip to a First Nations community in northern Alberta in the dead of winter, the creation of a documentary, and the publication of an anthology of essays. Faithful readers may recall me describing

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a social action project called “realfriends: stop cliquing, start connecting,” initiated by a class who wanted to break down the social barriers in our high school. Last year, in an interdisciplinary fashion, my class wrote and performed choral poetry to accompany the music performed at the school’s year-end concert. These experiences don’t only shape students; they shape how I see myself as an educator and how I can realize educational goals through creative pedagogical stances.



Creative Practices

Pedagogies can be understood as broad approaches to designing a classroom program, whereas I use the term “practices” to refer to the day-to-day means in which we structure learning experiences. As teachers, we have to be creative in our day-to-day practices: we have to determine how to organize learning for a variety of learner needs, what resources are most suitable for those diverse needs, and offer a range of options for students to demonstrate the required knowledge and skills. In this light, teaching is an art. Let me paint you a picture of some of the challenges we face in developing creative practices. Warning: it isn’t pretty.

In our high school of 930 students, we have a portable cart with 30 Chrome Books. We lost our computer labs this year as we welcomed a new grade level to our school and the computer labs were changed into classrooms. While we have more students and teachers in the building, we don’t have a feasible way for all students in one class to access a digital device or computer. I know that access to technology looks different in every school but I offer this description to emphasize how teachers have to be creative in figuring out how to embrace Google Classroom and other digital experiences when resources are limited. (We are, by the way, expected to receive two more carts of 30 Chrome Books later this semester, which will raise the access ratio to one Chrome Book per ten students in the school). Creativity, for teachers, is constantly being negotiated with what resources are available to students. Creativity, in our school’s situation, is not only about what activities to design in our Google Classrooms that will meet the

needs and interests of our students; it’s also about how to creatively divide access time of 30 Chrome Books with our 930 students.

What I am about to say next, I mean – but I am already apologizing in my head for writing this to you.

“*The most important resource in my classroom is my students. I have to believe this.*”

The most important resource in my classroom is my students. I have to believe this. Our classroom resources are often beyond our control. However, the opportunities for students to take up creative thinking are limitless. (Insert groan here). I’m not suggesting that material resources are not important. After all, it’s difficult to take an online course without a computer. What I’m signaling is that regardless of the resources

available to us, we need to be mindful of asking students to show flexibility, fluency, originality, and elaboration. Classroom practices that provide opportunities for students to be flexible and innovative tend to be more engaging for students.

If we believe Sir Ken Robinson that creativity is the hope of our future, then we need to make sure that students learn to value creativity. They need to see creativity not as something limited to an activity in art class or improvisation in drama class. They need to see creativity in all aspects of their education. We can start by making sure that students see how we, as educators, value creativity through our pedagogies and practices. And that, my dear colleagues, as we know, is not always a piece of cake.

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